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# Un Bel Composto: the unification of the visual arts at the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo

Arrie Ann Kain

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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*UN BEL COMPOSTO*: THE UNIFICATION OF THE VISUAL ARTS  
AT THE  
OLD SACRISTY OF SAN LORENZO

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

in

The School of Art

By  
Arrie Ann Kain  
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## **Dedication**

To Mom and Dad, for their unconditional love, good humor, and words of encouragement that lightened every load and sweetened every success;

and in honored memory of my grandfather, Matthew Ficovich (1909–1991), who left his family and home in Ston, Croatia, at the age of sixteen, in pursuit of the American dream.

## Acknowledgements

Above all others, I thank God, who has blessed me in untold ways. I would also like to recognize the two people whose support and fosterage has been unwavering in all of life's endeavors, big or small: my parents, Joan and David Kain. My appreciation, respect, and love for them know no bounds. Although their positive influences are immeasurable, I am particularly grateful to them for instilling in me a myriad of values at a young age, three of which merit a special recognition in this context: the worth of a solid education, the importance of a strong work ethic, and an appreciation for extraordinary literature, for they have provided me with the necessary tools to achieve, the will to continue, and the impulse to create.

I sincerely thank my sister, Zia, whose *joie de vivre* is a constant inspiration to seize each precious moment. I am so grateful for every experience we have shared—and will share—together. To my grandparents, Theresa Ficovich and Lucille Kain, and the late Matthew Ficovich and O.D. Kain, whose limitless sacrifices and steadfast devotion have made every dream dreamable; we are all in debt for the trails they have blazed. For their warmth, encouragement and curiosity, I'd like to thank my aunts and uncles, especially my Aunt Wanda, who perseveres despite all of life's challenges, and does so with a smile on her face. To each of my wonderful friends, near and far, thank you for simply being you. And to Andrew, my fiancé, whose loyalty and integrity I greatly cherish, and whose love and friendship sustain me.

To historians and students, in every genre, I am so grateful for the limitless amount of time and energy they have dedicated to realizing the vast body of scholarship at my disposal—this monumental task would not have been possible without them. Words cannot express how grateful I am to my colleague, my travelling-companion and my friend Sarah Hampton Cambas, whose positive perspective—in every facet of life—has made all the difference in this wonderful journey. I'd like to offer a special thanks to my committee members, Marchita Mauck and Rod Parker, for

the time and effort dedicated on my behalf. Marchita's patience and erudition wholeheartedly embody the essence of an educator, and each day in the classroom with her was a gift. Special thanks go to Rod, for believing in me each step of my academic career and graciously opening the door for my return to Louisiana State University. Finally, I thank the one and only Mark Zucker, who unbeknownst to him, in a classroom in the foothills of the Alps, during a summer abroad program, sparked an enduring passion for the cultural heritage of Italy. It was precisely because of that indelible experience that I sat in his classroom nine years later, in Baton Rouge, pursuing a Master's degree in Art History. As my committee chair, and my friend, he shepherded me through this enormous undertaking, offering honest counsel, essential expertise, and constant reassurance, for all of which I am eternally grateful.

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## Abstract

In Florence's prestigious district of Lion d'Oro, the Basilica of San Lorenzo, like numerous other medieval churches, began a significant expansion project during the first quarter of the Quattrocento. As a necessary means to raise capital and offset the enormous costs associated with the renovations, new chapels were attached to the main body of existing structures and privately endowed by established families; moreover, such projects allowed them to celebrate their status, flex their political muscle and extol their family's patron saints. The Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, for the burgeoning Medici, was an opportunity to construct their dynastic pantheon, setting the standard for future Renaissance building enterprises. Designed and built between the years 1417 and 1428, the structure served dual roles as both a sacristy and a family mausoleum. Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, the original patron, followed by his heirs, Cosimo and Lorenzo de' Medici, assembled the most prominent Florentine artists to design, furnish and ornament the structure with works of art in the name of their ascending political domination. This thesis represents an exploration of how each element of the Old Sacristy—the architecture, sculpture and painting—combines symbiotically with every other element in the Sacristy, iconographically as well as stylistically, to create *un bel composto*.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The genesis of the Italian Renaissance was largely made possible by the unique society of the city-state of Florence. This republican-governed state of relatively small size encouraged individuality, inspired creativity and promoted tolerance at all levels of its citizenry, and was thus a major conduit for the bountiful exchange of artistic, scientific and philosophical ideas across Italy and beyond. Not only was it a time for rediscovering the classics, it was the dawn of a “modern consciousness, a modern way of seeing and representing the world around us.”<sup>1</sup> The citizens of Florence regarded their buildings as more than just structures that served their respective utilitarian functions. These monuments—the Palazzo della Signoria, Or San Michele, Battistero di San Giovanni and Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore, to name a few—characterized the *popolo*’s spirit and conviction; today they remain standing as a testament to their strength.<sup>2</sup> When politics, diplomacy and even armies floundered, these buildings explicitly emitted an air of power and determination across Florence, the Arno Valley and into the far corners of Italy.<sup>3</sup> The Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, subtle in form, yet powerful in rhetoric, embodied the glories of the past with the hopes for the future; standing at the forefront of a new breed of dynastic patronage, it would set the standard for future Renaissance building enterprises.

Located in the city’s center, the *gonfalone* (district) of Lion d’Oro was home to one of Florence’s oldest and most renowned buildings, the Basilica of San Lorenzo. Originally consecrated by St. Ambrose, bishop of Milan, in 393, the totality of San Lorenzo’s building history is convoluted.<sup>4</sup> Around 1417, plans were devised and money was secured in order to renovate and

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Robert Walker, *The Feud that Sparked the Renaissance: How Brunelleschi and Ghiberti Changed the Art World* (New York: Harper Collins, William Morrow, 2002), 61.

<sup>2</sup> Howard Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Buildings* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 122.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 108.



augment the existing structure.<sup>5</sup> Firstly, civil authorities, in cooperation with the chapter, had to take the necessary steps of securing previously developed and highly valuable public and private land.<sup>6</sup> Next, interest was gauged among affluent parishioners regarding their willingness to help subsidize the expansion.<sup>7</sup> Auspiciously, Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici (1360–1429) was one of these men. One of the republic's wealthiest bankers, Giovanni di Bicci was responsible for Florence securing the papal account and helped to establish the Medici as one of the most prestigious families in Italy.

In the thirteenth century, as numerous medieval churches in Florence underwent significant expansion projects, a tradition developed in which patrons appropriated church chapels to be used as familial memorials.<sup>8</sup> Since late Antiquity, both secular and ecclesiastical men desired to be interred among saints and martyrs previously departed; this convention continued to develop well into the Middle Ages as cities' prosperity and power increased.<sup>9</sup> As a necessary means to offset the enormous costs associated with the renovations, new chapels were attached to the main body of existing structures, thus providing an advantageous opportunity for individual donors to raise capital.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, an endowment as such allowed established families to celebrate their status, flex their political muscle and extol their family's patron saints.<sup>11</sup> This arrangement between patrician and parish held the potential of being very symbiotic indeed. Concurrently with the planning of San Lorenzo's renovation project, Palla Strozzi, a rival Florentine banker, commissioned the construction of the sacristy of Santa Trinità as a family memorial, honoring the wishes of his

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<sup>5</sup> Bram Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage: The Rise of the Professional Artist in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Beverly Jackson (London: Penguin Books, 1987), 193.

<sup>6</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 107.

<sup>7</sup> Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage*, 193.

<sup>8</sup> Heinrich Klotz, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Early Works and the Medieval Tradition* (London: Academy Editions, 1990), 129; Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 107.

<sup>9</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 107.

deceased father; this undertaking by the Strozzi family was perhaps the impetus for Giovanni di Bicci to trump him.<sup>12</sup>

During the Trecento, the Medici family had a relatively nondescript presence in Florence. However, as Giovanni di Bicci concentrated his efforts on growing his banking empire and shrewdly involved himself in Florentine politics, the family's prestige, power and wealth grew exponentially in the following decades.<sup>13</sup> Regardless, Giovanni tactfully understood that in order to avoid perturbing fellows and rivals alike, one single family should not monopolize the rebuilding efforts of San Lorenzo. The Medici, together with eight other families of the *gonfalone* of Lion d'Oro—Ciai, Della Stufa, Ginori, Marco di Luca, Marignolli, Martelli, Neroni and Rondinelli—pledged themselves as patrons of the transept chapels.<sup>14</sup> While Giovanni could have settled for a single transept chapel as a place of burial, likening himself to the other patrons who did just that, his aspirations ran deeper. In addition to the chapel, dedicated to the Medici family saints, Cosmas and Damian, and prominently positioned at the south end of the transept, Giovanni also secured the rights to the adjacent sacristy (fig. 1).<sup>15</sup> Dedicated to his patron saint, John the Evangelist, this sacristy would dually serve as a family mausoleum. “The iconographical niceties could have been observed by dedicating the transept chapel to St. John the Evangelist, Giovanni's patron, and relinquishing the sacristy to SS. Cosmas and Damian,” notes Howard Saalman, “but the Medici star was in the ascendant and San Lorenzo's sacristy was to be the liturgical showplace of present pretensions and future expectations.”<sup>16</sup>

Early sources, including Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, Vespasiano da Bisticci, Giorgio Vasari, and Antonio di Piero Averlino, called Filarete, made references to the Old Sacristy and its artists in

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<sup>12</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 129, 130.

<sup>13</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 107; Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage*, 193.

<sup>14</sup> Dale Kent, *The Rise of the Medici* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 70.

<sup>15</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 113, 116.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

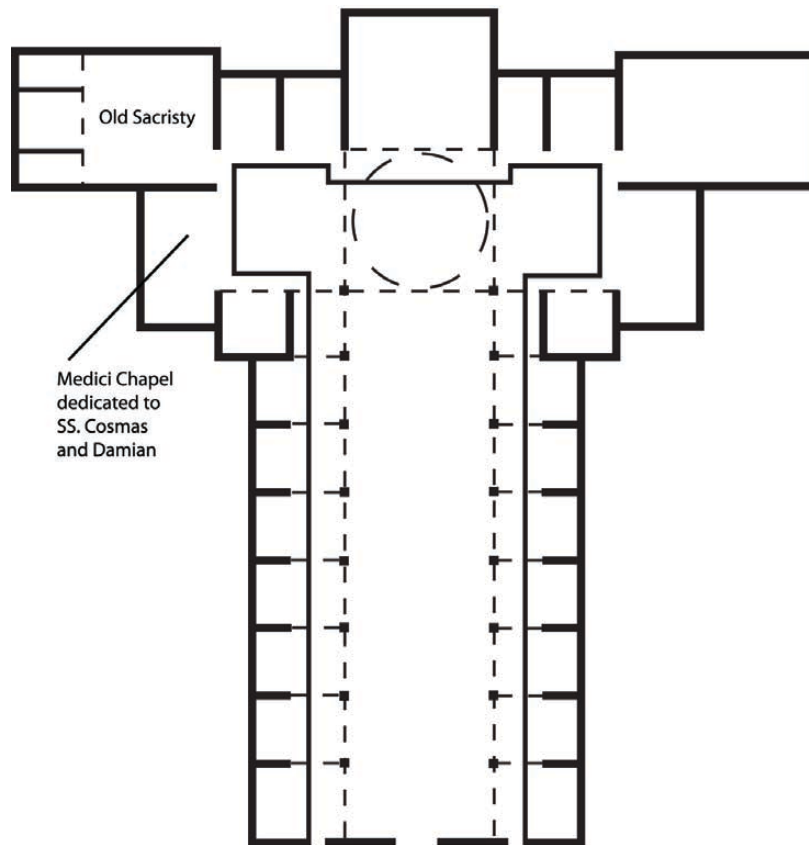


Figure 1. Ground plan of San Lorenzo, Florence, with the Old Sacristy and Medici Chapel dedicated to Saints Cosmas and Damian (reconstructed by author).

their fifteenth- and sixteenth-century writings. Over the next few centuries, scholars have continued to significantly expound upon the Sacristy's various historical, stylistic and iconographical elements. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries especially, noted historians, including, but certainly not limited to, H. W. Janson, John Paoletti, Roger Crum, Howard Saalman, Eugenio Battisti, James Beck, John Shearman and Dale Kent have contributed to an enormous body of scholarship on the subject, much of which is cited in the following study.

Brunelleschi, who had already garnered a scintillating reputation for his proposal of 1419 for the cupola of the Florence Duomo (Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore), was chosen by Giovanni di Bicci as architect for the Old Sacristy (Sagrestia Vecchia), a decision destining Medici family

commissions to eclipse all others.<sup>17</sup> The church of San Lorenzo was one part of a larger monastic complex that would ultimately include, beginning with Brunelleschi's Sacristy, other important Medici components: Michelangelo's New Sacristy (Sagrestia Nuova) and Laurentian Library and Matteo Nigetti's Chapel of the Princes (Cappella dei Principi). While it might appear that the sacristy is an integral part of the basilica, it is actually a completely autonomous structure. Giovanni di Bicci probably recruited Brunelleschi to work on the sacristy simultaneously while the prior of the chapter, Don Matteo di Bartolommeo Dolfini, was beginning plans for the church itself;<sup>18</sup> as noted by Antonio Manetti, in his *Life of Brunelleschi*, "the sacristy went forward before anything else."<sup>19</sup> Construction commenced in 1421, and according to the date clearly inscribed in the lantern of the dome, it was finished in 1428.<sup>20</sup> The expeditiousness of the sacristy's completion, long before renovations on the church itself were finished, was imperative for reasons twofold: Giovanni di Bicci wanted to see his promise to the parish fulfilled, and the need for a private burial chapel for the Medici family would soon be inevitable. Giovanni was laid to rest in 1429; his wife, Piccarda di Nannino di Aduardo de' Bueri died five years later.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Giovanni di Bicci's sons, Cosimo (1389–1464) and Lorenzo (1395–1440)—savvy businessmen poised for a promising succession—assumed the patronage of the sacristy, and in collaboration with their artistically elite friends, conceived of its sculptural decoration and embellishment. To be sure, the expansion of San Lorenzo was a part of their comprehensive plan for attaining a perpetual political bastion.

Rather than an appendage that provided an area for liturgical preparations and storing church vestments, the traditionally inconsequential sacristy, now with its dual function as a

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<sup>17</sup> Dale Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici and the Florentine Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 186; Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage*, 193.

<sup>18</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 113.

<sup>19</sup> Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, *The Life of Brunelleschi*, ed. Howard Saalman, trans. Catherine Enggass (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1970), 106.

<sup>20</sup> Eugenio Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi: The Complete Work*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Rizzoli, 1981), 84.

<sup>21</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 116, notes that the space did not actually begin to function as a sacristy until the half completed church was dedicated in 1461.

mausoleum, assumed a much more significant role as a pantheon for future generations of Medici.<sup>22</sup> The iconographical themes that evolved were a clear and deliberate conception between artists and patrons working in tandem. The fulfillment of the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo, with its unification of architecture, sculpture, and painting, may be seen as a springboard for the Medici's emergence as great patrons of the arts, but more significantly, as a palpable manifestation of their ascending dominance. To that end, the following chapter provides an examination of Brunelleschi's architecture. Realized in a fresh interpretation of the purest forms, the structure served not only as a sacristy and burial place for the Medici, but also symbolized their ambitions for political, as well as heavenly, triumph. The sculptural program, inclusive of Buggiano's tomb and chapel-altar and Donatello's stucco and bronze ornamentation, addressed in the third chapter, elaborates on the collective dynastic, saintly and political iconography. Accounting for the third component of the visual arts, chapter four elucidates the symbolic significance of the astronomical fresco painting on the hemispherical dome of the chapel. That which emerges from these studies will serve as the basis for our conclusion in the final chapter; that is, how each element—architecture, sculpture and painting—of the Old Sacristy, conceived of by a group of equally innovative masters, symbiotically unifies in the spirit of the Medici to create *un bel composto*.

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<sup>22</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 130.

## Chapter 2: The Architecture

Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446) was, in the fifteenth century, as his legacy remains today, an extraordinarily gifted man whose arsenal included a free-thinking intellect, a varied skill-set, an elite education, an esteemed array of patrons, a spirit of ingenuity and an opportunity to revolutionize the art world. He was a talented sculptor, mechanic and engineer and is credited for having single-handedly discovered linear perspective, unequivocally one of the most important concepts of Renaissance art. Be that as it may, he is chiefly renowned for his architectural achievements, and the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo was not only Brunelleschi's first ecclesiastical construct but also the first Renaissance building in which a visitor could gain access.<sup>23</sup>

The sacristy's location, abutting the transept of the church (fig. 1), and its square plan with an attached square chapel, found precedents at Santa Trinità, Santa Croce and other thirteenth- and fourteenth-century churches.<sup>24</sup> Here, however, the similarities by and large cease. Whatever Brunelleschi's examples may have been, from this point the Old Sacristy evolved as a unique entity. The spatial organization of the sacristy is comprised of two simple geometries, the square and circle, and his conscious hierarchical arrangement of these ideal forms is riddled with symbolism.<sup>25</sup> "Filippo's primary decision to make the main space of the sacristy a square, equal to the crossing square of the adjoining church," Saalman relates, "is a significant indication of a basic tendency in Brunelleschi's work, namely to assimilate rather than to differentiate the various parts of his buildings."<sup>26</sup> In other words, he systematically integrated these basic shapes in a proportionate and measurable manner, so that there existed a strict and logical harmony between the parts and the

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<sup>23</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 82; Frederick Hartt, *History of Italian Renaissance Art: Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994), 158.

<sup>24</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 123.

<sup>25</sup> Giovanni Fanelli, *Brunelleschi*, trans. Helene Cassin (Florence: Scala Istituto Fotografico Editoriale, 1977), 47.

<sup>26</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 141.

whole.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the sacristy we are witness to Brunelleschi's sophisticated horizontal and vertical triadic rhythms that stretch from corner to corner, floor to ceiling. The main area of the sacristy measures 11.60 meters, or 20 *braccia*, per side and is divided into three horizontal zones (fig. 2): the lower zone is defined by corner pilasters, the intermediate zone is articulated by arches with pendentives and the upper zone consists of a twelve-part umbrella dome.<sup>28</sup>

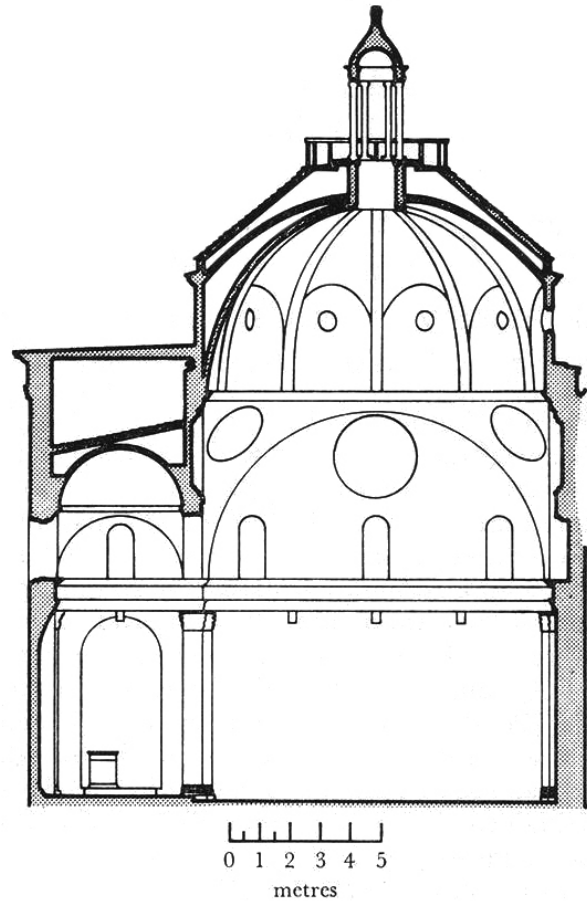


Figure 2. Section of the Old Sacristy.

The lowest zone, Romanesque in its austerity, has three “purely architectonic” walls, save the awkwardly placed entrance door in the northeastern corner of the room and Verrocchio’s tomb of

<sup>27</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 82.

<sup>28</sup> Fanelli, *Brunelleschi*, 47; Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 130. An Italian measurement of length, a *braccio* is slightly less than two feet, or roughly 23 inches. *Braccio*, which also means “arm” in Italian, can be translated into an “arm’s-length” measurement.

Piero and Giovanni de' Medici in the adjacent wall, completed in 1472 (fig. 3).<sup>29</sup> The only hint of decoration on the bare walls is the foliated consoles placed just under the continuous entablature with a frieze of alternating cherubim and seraphim. Such a simplified treatment of the lower walls

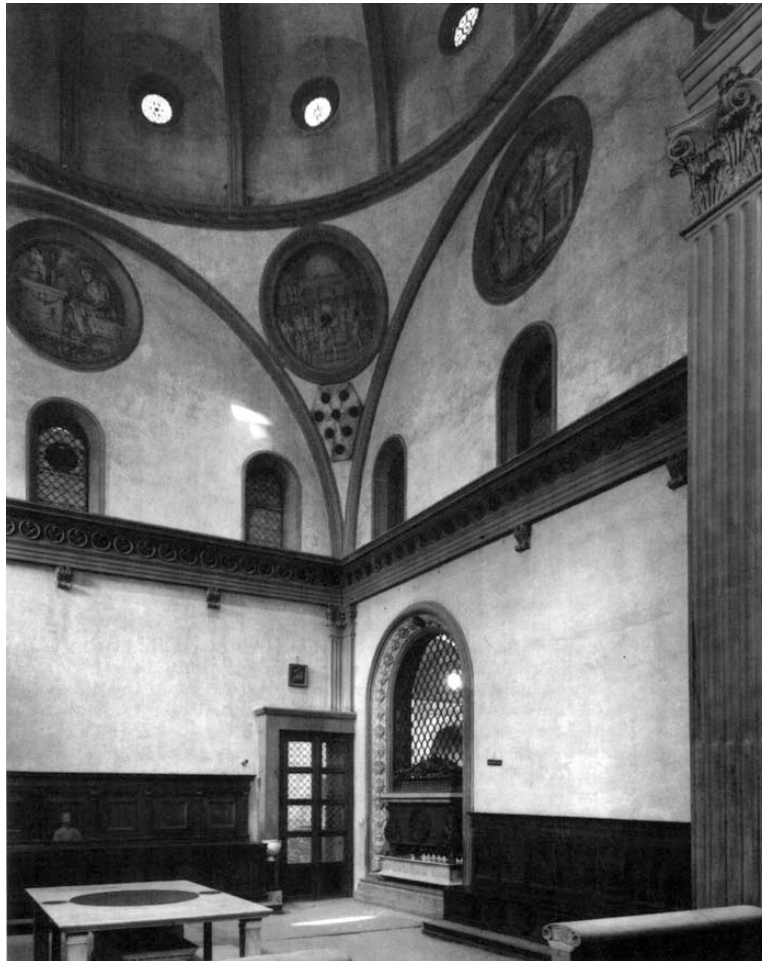


Figure 3. Old Sacristy facing northeast toward the entrance.

was to be expected for a space like this; appropriate sacristy furniture—wooden benches and cupboards—for the chapter would eventually line these walls.<sup>30</sup> Prior to the sculptural intervention of Donatello, the spaces to each side of the chapel opening—where the bronze doors now stand—

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<sup>29</sup> Ludwig H. Heydenreich, *Architecture in Italy: 1400–1500*, rev. ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 16; Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 84. Ibid., Battisti suggests that the original entrance to the Sacristy could possibly have been where Verrocchio's tomb now stands, adding that keys and locks for the current door were only purchased in 1442.

<sup>30</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 84; Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 141.



were equally sparse. In the corners of the room, fluted pilasters bend inwards in the main space, three flutes to a side, while a whole pilaster flanks each side of the chapel opening.<sup>31</sup> The intricacies of the Corinthian capitals are identical—detail for detail—in every way.<sup>32</sup>

The entablature visually joins the sacristy and chapel (fig. 4), but more importantly, it divides the main room between the austerity below and progressively richer zones above, creating a wonderfully melodic tension.<sup>33</sup> Articulated in *pietra serena*, a dark grey stone, a large lunette spans the perimeter of each wall. Within these arches, the ternary placement of the round-headed windows—three on each of the main walls, one on each side of the chapel opening, and one on each side of the chapel itself—further reinforces the entablature’s unifying properties.<sup>34</sup> Interpolated between the arches, pendentives transition to the ribbed dome above. In regard to this logical interplay of space, Ludwig Heydenreich has said, “The pendentive is a characteristic invention—or more precisely a rediscovery—of Brunelleschi’s and is of the greatest importance for the whole development of modern architecture.”<sup>35</sup> Four large roundels are placed within these pendentives—with the distinctive Medici coat-of-arms snugly squeezed in below (fig. 5)—while four are centered in the lunettes above the axial windows. Whether or not the roundels were to remain blind or were intended to contain plastic decoration remains a matter of speculation.<sup>36</sup>

In the uppermost level of the sacristy’s main space, the umbrella dome, or what is typified as a dome *a creste e a vele* (“with crests and sails”), makes for a stately, if not heavenly, culmination; it was completed in 1428, as determined by the date inscribed on the lantern.<sup>37</sup> In fact, as observed by

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<sup>31</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>33</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 79; Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 127.

<sup>34</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 127.

<sup>35</sup> Heydenreich, *Architecture in Italy*, 16.

<sup>36</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 127, believes that, from the beginning, the roundels were probably intended to contain plastic decoration; H. W. Janson, *The Sculpture of Donatello*, vol. 2, *Critical Catalogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1957), 135, suspects that Brunelleschi envisioned them as blind *oculi*, and the plastic decoration may have been an afterthought.

<sup>37</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 82.



Figure 4. (left) Old Sacristy facing southeast toward the chapel. Figure 5. (right) Medici coat-of-arms in the pendentive.

Eugenio Battisti, the single point where decoration and structure converge in a necessary and functional manner is here in the dome, which is “as unusual as it is perfect in itself as a form.”<sup>38</sup> From the base of the dome, lined by a band simulating cloth bound by ropes, twelve “Gothic” ribs, which in turn create twelve individual vaults, spring upward (fig. 6).<sup>39</sup> They are joined at an opening at the apex of the dome, which supports the small lantern.<sup>40</sup> Echoing the aperture at the top, each of the twelve segments is punctuated by an *oculus*; while these apertures are the single most important sources of illumination, they are also metaphors for the “light shed by the teachings of the Apostles.”<sup>41</sup> Homogenous light distribution is an essential element in Brunelleschi’s overall vision for the space, and in order to accommodate the proper sacristy furnishings in the lower zone, all light sources are designated above the entablature. The implementation of an umbrella dome is likely a direct result of Brunelleschi’s desire for an evenly illuminated room.<sup>42</sup> Because the thrust of the

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>40</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 127.

<sup>41</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 82; Fanelli, *Brunelleschi*, 53.

<sup>42</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 142.



Figure 6. The umbrella dome.

dome is equally dispersed between the concentric segments, it can accommodate the insertion of small windows; the result is a light yet fortified structure.<sup>43</sup> In a clever effort to relate the upper zone with ones below, four of the twelve ribs, the center window on each wall, its corresponding roundel above, and the central leaf console below are aligned axially.<sup>44</sup> By relating parts to whole, Brunelleschi has successfully achieved a divergence of dramatic sensations: “a slow but solemn and tightly focused ascending movement which can also be read in reverse as irradiation downwards.”<sup>45</sup>

Surprisingly, to identify the sources of Brunelleschi’s architectural innovations, the search does not lead to Rome, but rather to Byzantine influences from the Veneto. San Marco in Venice

<sup>43</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 82.

<sup>44</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 127.

<sup>45</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 82.



and San Vitale in neighboring Ravenna embody elements of *all'antica* architecture.<sup>46</sup> However, it is the twelfth-century Baptistry of Padua that stands as the most likely prototype for Brunelleschi's Old Sacristy (fig. 7).<sup>47</sup> A combination of certain precedents from the Paduan Baptistry can be found



Figure 7. Giusto de' Menabuoi, frescoed dome, c. 1378, Baptistry, Padua Cathedral.

in the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo: a comparably scaled square room, a dome on pendentives and, linked by a serliana motif arcade, an adjoining chapel, with its own dome.<sup>48</sup> The frescoes that cover the wall in the Paduan Baptistry are clearly absent in the Sacristy, but some aspects of the pictorial decoration are translated into Brunelleschi's architectural structure. For the *pietra serena* frames that highlight certain structural elements—the ribs, the base of the dome, the lunettes and the

<sup>46</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 128.

<sup>47</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 133. For Gabriel Blumenthal's hypothesis that the Old Sacristy was planned essentially as a revival of a "thousand-year-old tradition of a no-longer-existing baptistery of San Lorenzo," see "Filippo Brunelleschi's *Sagrestia Vecchia* and the Ancient Baptistry of San Lorenzo," in *Watching Art: Writings in Honor of James Beck*, ed. Lynn Catterson and Mark Zucker (Todi: ediert, 2006), 85–94.

<sup>48</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 134; Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 128.

roundels—Brunelleschi borrowed from the thickly painted lines that provide the framework for the profusion of frescoes running around the perimeter of the Paduan Baptistery walls.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, from the Baptistery to the Sacristy, we observe a recurrence in the positioning of the Evangelist roundels and a similar placement of the coat-of-arms.<sup>50</sup> (This would help make the case, if Brunelleschi, in fact, knew the Paduan Baptistery first-hand, that he did intend for the roundels ultimately to contain plastic decoration.)

We know from Manetti's *Life* that Brunelleschi spent time in Rome with Donatello, observing "the method and the symmetry of the ancients' way of building."<sup>51</sup> While no evidence exists for a trip to the Veneto to study the Paduan Baptistery directly, it is possible that Brunelleschi took such a voyage before he commenced his career as an architect, sometime prior to 1418.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, with the Baptistery of Florence (Battistero di San Giovanni) so easily accessible, Brunelleschi did not have to journey to Padua or Venice to study the novel innovations he would eventually employ in the Sacristy. The Florentine Baptistery (fig. 8) contained a repertory of *all'antica* examples, and as Saalman notes, it was Brunelleschi's "school and point of departure." Certain elements, including the "flanking pilasters, the arch over the altar chapel, the form of the altar itself, [and] the profiles of arches and entablature," he quoted from the Florentine Baptistery.<sup>53</sup>

As for the main dome of the Old Sacristy, its novelty lies in the fact that it is "Roman" in shape, yet, as evidenced by its webs, "Gothic" in structure.<sup>54</sup> Once again, we return to Padua as one possible source for Brunelleschi's inspiration. The choir vaulting in the basilica of Saint Anthony of Padua (Sant'Antonio di Padova) is composed of steeply rising ribs, joined at the apex, that are a continuance of the engaged columns below. Tellingly, there is also a sequence of *oculi* that are set

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<sup>49</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 134.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>51</sup> Manetti, *Life*, 50.

<sup>52</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 128; Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 139.

<sup>53</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 128.

<sup>54</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 139.





Figure 8. Baptistery of Florence.

into the bottom of the individual vaults, right below the small characteristic Byzantine windows.<sup>55</sup> Nowhere in Tuscany, nor in all of Italy, was there a history of domed sacristies, and that remained the case until 1488, when Giuliano da Sangallo designed the sacristy for Santo Spirito.<sup>56</sup> By adopting a variety of characteristics and ingeniously appropriating them anew in the Sacristy, Brunelleschi developed a fresh architectural syntax that would serve a functional yet deeply personal program—for it was not in its capacity as a sacristy that a dome was required, but as a mausoleum *all'antica*.<sup>57</sup>

The wall of the chapel (fig. 9), with its serliana motif, is the most visually commanding in the room. It is impossible to precisely date the chapel's addition to the sacristy, but we know that it

<sup>55</sup> Klotz, *Brunelleschi: Early Works*, 133.

<sup>56</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 128.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

existed by 1434, due to a recently discovered document that provides a *terminus ante quem*.<sup>58</sup> Upon entering the square apse, we are confronted with a space that, in many respects, mimics that of the sacristy proper. A dome crowns the upper zone and the intermediate zone consists of arches, pendentives and the same round-headed windows, albeit slightly smaller, as the ones found in the



Figure 9. Old Sacristy facing south wall toward chapel.

<sup>58</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 84.



main space (fig. 10). The lowest zone is defined by the continuance of the unifying entablature and foliated consoles, which mark the center of each wall niche, identical to those in the main room.<sup>59</sup>

There are, however, some elements of distinction within this “microcosm” as well, beginning with the shallow concave niches set in each wall of the chapel, articulated by their *pietra serena* trim (fig. 11). This pattern of recessions acts as a series of “curved lenses” that encourage viewers to sharpen their focus on this small, independent entity, and, to a certain extent, distinguishes the walls

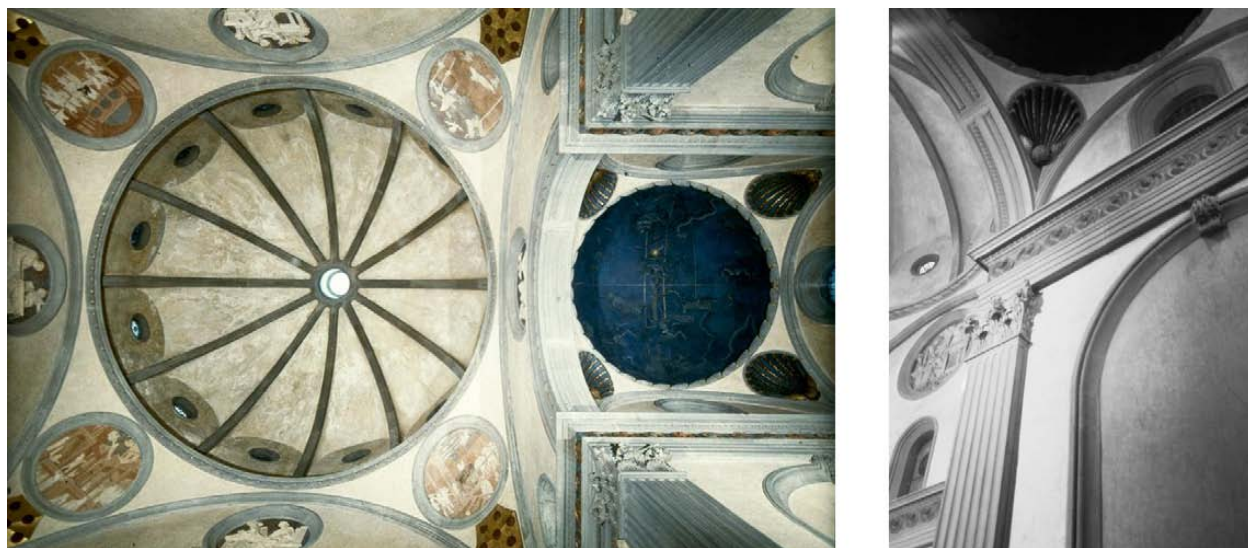


Figure 10. (left) The umbrella dome and the chapel dome. Figure 11. (right) Detail of the chapel.

of the two spaces—the bare and architectonic walls of the sacristy against the shallow ternary undulations of the chapel.<sup>60</sup> Inverted shells, painted blue and accented with gold leaf, occupy the pendentives, and slender pilasters, commensurate with their space, mark the inner chapel corners. A band of what appears to be bunched cloth tied with ropes encircles the space.<sup>61</sup> Here, instead of repeating a smaller version of the umbrella dome, Brunelleschi has crowned the compact space with

<sup>59</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 97; Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 127.

<sup>60</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 97.

<sup>61</sup> John Shearman, *Only Connect: Art and the Spectator in the Italian Renaissance* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 172, suggests that there is an architecturally represented illusion within each dome, seen in the twisted bands of fabric that encase them. He says, “It is very remarkable that we have here . . . an event that seems to inaugurate the spectator’s visual experience; the event is the pulling back and securing of a cloth to reveal each dome . . . This fiction of a happening, of a momentary, impermanent state of the building as it is prepared for the spectator, recalls the design of Donatello’s tomb of Giovanni and Piccarda below, contingent upon the spectator’s arrival and presence.”



a small, smooth hemispherical dome. By and large, however, the correspondence between the sacristy and the chapel is quite tangible, as Brunelleschi characteristically refrained from implementing sharply divergent components.<sup>62</sup>

On either side of the altar chapel there are two flanking service rooms, which were added at a later date. The room on the left side, covered by a barrel vault, contains a well and marble *lavabo* with a heraldic symbol of Piero de' Medici.<sup>63</sup> The room to the right houses furniture for the liturgy used for the mass preparation.<sup>64</sup> Unlike the left side, this room is unvaulted and has a wooden staircase that leads to the roof above and the crypt below.<sup>65</sup> Before Donatello's addition of the bronze doors, Manetti indicated that the spaces to either side of the chancel opening were "left unfinished, with only the opening with a relieving arch above."<sup>66</sup> The chronology of these flanking rooms (and respective furnishings) remains inconclusive, but before their creation, the chapel, as well as the main space of the sacristy, was illuminated in an "extremely regular, widely-spaced rhythm."<sup>67</sup> The windows within the chapel itself helped to tighten focus, much in the same way as the niches did. Once the side rooms were fully erected, however, and the chapel's source of light was limited to one window, the illumination was "suddenly accelerated, and light was intensified with an almost Baroque effect."<sup>68</sup> The quality of the sacristy's illumination was so exceptional that it was mentioned, along with the church of San Lorenzo itself, in a 1459 poem, celebrating Pope Pius II's visit to San Lorenzo, which reads, in part: "and to one side is a sacristy such that never has there

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<sup>62</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 141.

<sup>63</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 123. The date and attribution of the *lavabo* have long been subjects of debate, and since its creation scholars have credited Andrea del Verrocchio, Antonio Rossellino and/or Donatello as either the individual artist or in collaboration with one another. For a lengthier discussion, see Andrew Butterfield, *The Sculptures of Andrea del Verrocchio* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 9–12.

<sup>64</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 97.

<sup>65</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 123.

<sup>66</sup> Manetti, *Life*, 50.

<sup>67</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 97.

<sup>68</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 97.

been one so beautiful, and so marvelous it is and so festive that he who gazes long at it thinks himself blinded because there seems sun in all of it.”<sup>69</sup>

In its purest form, the sacristy was based on two basic geometrical shapes, the square and circle. When seen together with the symbolic implications of Giovanni di Bicci’s centrally located tomb in the sacristy proper (fig. 9), we can be sure that Brunelleschi “was almost certainly inspired by the symbolism underlying the resurrection and spiritual glorification of the dead, who, from the earthly sphere—represented by the cubic base—are transported heavenward in a crescendo of light, epitomized by the dome illuminated by twelve windows.”<sup>70</sup> In a subtle yet beautiful manner, typical of Brunelleschi, he managed to weave heaven and earth together seamlessly. Furthermore, by selectively quoting and, in turn, manipulating various architectural codes from Romanesque, Gothic, Byzantine and ancient sources, he made a new statement on humanist architecture—one that was immediately celebrated and would serve as a prototype for future emulation. For Filippo, the “sacristy was to be a definitive test of [his] personal vision of a Florentine architecture renewed and purified by the breath of reborn Antiquity.”<sup>71</sup> For Giovanni, the realization of the Sacristy was more than a metaphoric stratagem to outshine rival Florentine families, especially the Albizzi and Strozzi. It was an integral and decisive step toward fulfilling the Medici’s long-range dynastic ambitions, for it symbolized not only aspirations of a final political triumph, but guaranteed a heavenly one as well. With this masterpiece, Brunelleschi graced subsequent generations of heirs and artists with an exquisitely simple palette upon which they could chisel their legacy and craft their magic, respectively.

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<sup>69</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 192. The original poem was composed in Italian, of which the corresponding translation reads, “E dall’un lato è una sagrestia, Che mai più non ne fu una sì bella, Et sì meravigliosa et sì giulìa, Che chi la mira fiso par ch’abbagli, Perchè per tutto par che sol vi sia.”

<sup>70</sup> Henry A. Millon, *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo: The Representation of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1994), 124.

<sup>71</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 123.

### Chapter 3: The Sculpture

The two main components that constitute the Old Sacristy's elegant sculptural program as they relate to the scope of this analysis are Buggiano's freestanding tomb and chapel-altar and Donatello's sculptural ornamentation. Due to its breadth and depth, discussion of the latter component will be further divided into stucco reliefs and bronze doors. While care has been taken to separate the topics for the sake of clarity, one must bear in mind that they should be seen as a harmonious whole. It should also be noted that Andrea del Verrocchio's resplendent tomb, created for Cosimo de' Medici's sons, Piero and Giovanni, is situated in the wall that borders both the sacristy and the transept chapel, dedicated to Saints Cosmas and Damian. Completed in 1472, it falls outside the chronology relevant to our evaluation, and for that reason has not been included beyond a brief description in the conclusion.

#### Buggiano's Tomb and Chapel-altar

In the center of the main room stands the most significant liturgical component of the sacristy—the tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici and his wife, Piccarda, who were laid to rest in 1429 and 1433, respectively (fig. 12).<sup>72</sup> The sarcophagus, set beneath a large marble table (fig. 9), has generally been ascribed to the hand of Brunelleschi's adopted son, Andrea di Lazzaro Cavalcanti (1412–1462), called Buggiano.<sup>73</sup> While the completion date of the sarcophagus is probably 1433, the date of the table is more difficult to determine, and it was possibly a later addition. In his 1433 tax declaration, Brunelleschi refers to several works that Buggiano made for Cosimo, including a tomb,

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<sup>72</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 132.

<sup>73</sup> Roger J. Crum, "Donatello's 'Ascension of St. John the Evangelist' and the Old Sacristy as Sepulchre," *Artibus et Historiae* 16, no. 32 (1995): 143.



Figure 12. Andrea di Lazzaro Cavalcanti (called Buggiano), Tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici and his wife, Piccarda, side facing the entrance of the Old Sacristy.

altar and “other works.”<sup>74</sup> The reference to the “other works” could account for the table.<sup>75</sup> Many scholars often refer to the table as an altar, but John Shearman insists that it is, in fact, a table, utilized in the sacristy as a “necessary working surface on which vestments for the Office are laid and liturgical books and utensils prepared.”<sup>76</sup> Short in stature, the table has four squared columns as legs and is topped by a marble rectangle with a large porphyry disc in the middle, which is flanked by two bronze discs containing the Medici *palle*.<sup>77</sup> Together, sarcophagus and table form a monument type that is normally reserved for saints and *beati*.<sup>78</sup> Perhaps Giovanni himself wanted something more understated, such as a modest tombstone in the floor. Regardless, it seems clear that the definitive location was to be in the middle of the sacristy, a claim further reinforced upon noting the

<sup>74</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 132-133.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>76</sup> Shearman, *Only Connect*, 10.

<sup>77</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 133.

<sup>78</sup> Shearman, *Only Connect*, 10.

perfect vertical alignment between and identical proportions of the tomb's porphyry disc and the dome's *oculus*.<sup>79</sup>

The marble sarcophagus bears an inscription on each of its long sides. The one on the near side of the entrance, carved in Roman capitals, reads:

If services to the homeland, if fame and family and generosity toward all were measured on the dark mountain, alas, he would happily live with his chaste wife in the homeland, an aid to the poor and a haven and support to his friends. But since all things are conquered by death, you, Giovanni, lie in this tomb, and you, Piccarda, as well. Accordingly an old man grieves, a youth and a boy, each age. The saddened fatherland, deprived of its parent, grieves.<sup>80</sup>

This inscription is undated and its attribution is indefinite. Some scholars have credited it to Poliziano (1454–1494), a very close humanist associate of the Medici family and contemporary of Lorenzo the Magnificent (1449–1492), Cosimo de' Medici's grandson.<sup>81</sup> Yet it is hard to believe that Cosimo and Lorenzo would have left the plaque, immediately visible to viewers entering the sacristy, without an inscription for roughly thirty years after their father's death.<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, this would indicate, given the chronology of such an attribution, that Lorenzo the Magnificent retroactively intervened in his grandfather's iconography.<sup>83</sup> A more plausible attribution for the inscription, suggested by Saalman, is to Niccolò Niccoli (1364–1437), a humanist and close friend of Cosimo de' Medici.<sup>84</sup> Vespasiano da Bisticci, biographer of Cosimo de' Medici, reports that upon Niccolò's death, he donated a substantial portion of his library to Cosimo, who, along with his brother

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<sup>79</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 132; Crum, "Ascension," 150. It should be noted that some scholars have differing opinions as to whether or not Giovanni di Bicci's tomb was always intended to be placed in its current location. Ibid., 160, n. 24, Crum theorizes that Giovanni may have originally desired an interment between the shared wall of the sacristy and transept chapel of Saints Cosmas and Damian (where Verrocchio's tomb of Piero and Giovanni now stands) as a means to unite himself to both of his chapel projects. John T. Paoletti, "Donatello's Bronze Doors for the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo," *Artibus et Historiae* 11, no. 21 (1990): 68–69, n. 25, notes that the top of the sarcophagus bears a finished carving, which would, at the very least, indicate that the tomb was "intended to stand free of the current vesting table."

<sup>80</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 59.

<sup>81</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 190.

<sup>82</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 190.

<sup>83</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 59.

<sup>84</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 140.

Lorenzo, was the executor of his will.<sup>85</sup> Regardless, the inscription made obvious the Medici's progressive interest in appropriating classical traditions and forms in an effort to make known their intentions of absolute dominance, especially since this type of wording was not normally used for private citizens, but reserved for the state.<sup>86</sup> The other inscription, facing away from the sacristy's entrance, is recorded in more archaic characters, and its devotional content, of a particularly laudatory nature, assimilates other Florentine tomb inscriptions of the Quattrocento.<sup>87</sup> A translation of this inscription reads:

Cosimo and Lorenzo dei Medici sons of the very distinguished man Giovanni di Averardo and sons of Piccarda di Adovardo have seen to the construction of this tomb for their very beloved parents. Giovanni died ten days before the first of March 1428 [February 20, 1429], but Piccarda passed away 13 days before the first of May in the fifth year following.<sup>88</sup>

This inscription is indicative of a shift in patronage, an idea that will be further explored in the discussion of Donatello's sculptural ornamentation.

Shearman, in a chapter of his book called "A More Engaged Spectator," presents us with an intriguing perspective as to how an observer addresses the tomb. He implies that the tomb is not only a final resting place for the interred, but also a visible monument whose existence is dependent upon a witness. On the side of the sarcophagus facing away from the entrance, a pair of angels is shown in the act of opening a scroll of parchment, revealing the names of both its commissioners and occupants (fig. 13).<sup>89</sup> Shearman notes that the angels are not "suspended in a state of permanent existence"; rather, what they do is "contingent upon our presence, as a fiction of something that

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<sup>85</sup> Vespasiano da Bisticci, *The Vespasiano Memoirs: Lives of Illustrious Men of the Fifteenth Century*, trans. William George and Emily Waters (London: George Routledge and Sons, 1926), 219.

<sup>86</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 190; Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 59.

<sup>87</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 191; Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 46.

<sup>88</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 46.

<sup>89</sup> Shearman, *Only Connect*, 13. Shearman believes that Cosimo employed a "consortium" of artists for the execution of his father's tomb, with Donatello as the major creative force and Buggiano acting as an assistant. His conclusion is based on a previous design of Donatello and Michelozzo's, very similar in nature, of the sarcophagus for the tomb of Baldassare Cossa (the antipope John XXIII). Giovanni di Bicci was not only a close friend of and banker to Cossa, but he was one of the executors of his will. For a lengthier discussion of this relationship, as well an in-depth analysis of the



Figure 13. Andrea di Lazzaro Cavalcanti (called Buggiano), Tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici and his wife, Piccarda, side facing away from the entrance of the Old Sacristy.

happens as we look at the tombs.”<sup>90</sup> On the opposite side of the sarcophagus—the side facing the entrance to the sacristy (fig. 12)—we see a similar design; however, for the viewer, its implications are different. Inscribed on an *all’antica* tablet, the angels seemingly hold it in such a way—tilted slightly toward the approaching viewer who gazes down upon it—as if to encourage reading. For this reason, the entrance side is the more dramatic of the two, especially when bearing in mind that the original entrance may have been where Verrocchio’s tomb now stands. “Through the actions of the winged *putti* on both sides of the sarcophagus,” relates Shearman, “the invention of the artist acknowledges the momentary but infinitely repeatable presence of a spectator.”<sup>91</sup> Shearman’s observations serve to confirm, in my opinion, Saalman’s claim that Niccolò Niccoli was indeed responsible for the entrance-side inscription shortly after Giovanni’s death; given the nature of the

Cossa tomb, see R. W. Lightbown, *Donatello and Michelozzo: An Artistic Partnership and Its Patrons in the Early Renaissance*, vol. 1, *Text* (London: Henry Miller, 1980), 4–51.

<sup>90</sup> Shearman, *Only Connect*, 13.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

angels' interaction with spectator, it is difficult to imagine that such a major component of this dynamic—the epitaph—was absent until Poliziano's intervention some thirty years later.

Seldom mentioned is the element of bronze incorporated in the tomb, made manifest in a cluster of ivy on both sides of the table. In stark contrast to the white marble piers that hold up each corner of the table, two highly classical Tuscan columns, made of bronze, are placed in the center of its long sides (figs. 12 and 13). Where the Tuscan capitals meet the underside of the marble table, a sprig of ivy seemingly grows up and grips the edge of the table's top, where it meets the discs inlaid with the Medici *palle*. In funereal traditions, “it is the evergreen, seasonless nature of ivy, unchanging in frost and sun,” that symbolically expresses the Medici's expectation of immortality.<sup>92</sup>

It is a feasible postulation that patron and artist derived at the idea of placing the tomb in the center of the room—directly under the heavenly realm of the umbrella dome with its allusions to the twelve Apostles—from an Early Christian custom in which “a prominent layman chose to have himself buried in the centre of a mausoleum-church surrounded symbolically by cenotaphs of the apostles.”<sup>93</sup> The reference here is to the original tomb of Constantine in the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople. To be sure, Florentines would have no empirical knowledge of this tomb, for it no longer existed in the fifteenth century, but they were able to familiarize themselves with this remarkable arrangement via the writings of Eusebius of Caesarea. Vespasiano records that the works of Eusebius were standard items in several major fifteenth-century libraries, including Cosimo's.<sup>94</sup> Regardless of the validity of the inference, it is hard to ignore the parallel between the two entities, especially in light of the Medici's over-arching ambitions. Posthumously, Cosimo was named *Pater Patriae*, or “Father of the Homeland,” an honorific title in its own right. But is it not possible that

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 15–16. For specific examples of evergreen's traditional roots in classical poetry, as well as Renaissance poetry, see *ibid.*, 15.

<sup>93</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 140.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 140–141. See Bisticci, *Vespasiano Memoirs*, 50, for a reference to Pope Nicholas V's book collection, which included the works of Eusebius. See also the Life of Cosimo de' Medici in *ibid.*, 213–234.



during his lifetime, he aimed to identify his familial legacy with one of the most venerable figures in Christianity?

Aside from the tomb of Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici and his wife, Piccarda, and possibly its marble table, the chapel-altar is the earliest component of the iconographical program (fig. 14).<sup>95</sup> It is situated two steps up from the main sacristy space, and one step up from the two flanking rooms. Its inscription dates to the year 1432, and it too has generally been credited to Buggiano. As previously mentioned, Brunelleschi's tax declarations corroborate this in its reference to the "altar" that Buggiano was paid for.<sup>96</sup> Additionally, he was responsible for the "very fine openwork balustrade inspired by early Christian models."<sup>97</sup> The delicate labyrinth of lilies and vines, funerary symbols "that threaten to grow beyond their borders,"<sup>98</sup> create a light and open pattern normally found not in marble, but in metal work.<sup>99</sup> On both the front and rear of the altar, four colonettes divide the long sides into three panels, assimilating, in design, the altar in the Baptistery of Florence. Brunelleschi's bronze panel from the Florentine Baptistery door competition of 1401, now in the Bargello, formed the central section of the altar front (fig. 15). Seen together with the wooden crucifix hanging in the shallow niche behind the altar, the main scene of this panel, depicting Abraham's sacrifice of his son, Isaac, was a prefiguration of God's sacrifice of his only Son.<sup>100</sup> (Behind this panel, in an inner compartment, is where the inscribed date can be found.) Depicted on either side of the *Isaac* panel are carved reliefs of the prophets Daniel and Jeremiah; on the rear side of the altar, three additional carved relief panels display a half-length figure of the Madonna and

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<sup>95</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 133.

<sup>96</sup> Battisti, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 84.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Patricia Fortini Brown, "Laetentur Caeli: The Council of Florence and the Astronomical Fresco in the Old Sacristy," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 44 (1981): 180.

<sup>99</sup> Bonnie A. Bennett and David G. Wilkins, *Donatello* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984), 81.

<sup>100</sup> Crum, "Ascension," 150. Ibid., 152, Crum suggests that the scene of Abraham and Isaac was, perhaps, also an allusion to the Sacristy's original patron. In a book dedicated to Cosimo de' Medici in 1455, Marsilio Ficino honorably described Cosimo's father as "a figure of Abraham"; thus, Crum "wonder[s] if Giovanni di Bicci was generally considered as an Abraham figure and was commemorated as such in his tomb chapel."



Figures 14. (left) View of the chapel-altar. Figure 15. (right) Filippo Brunelleschi, *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, 1401–1402, National Museum of Bargello, Florence.

Child, flanked by the prophets Ezekiel and Isaiah. The four Evangelists, depicted in the roundels of the main sacristy space, are prefigured by these four prophets—“the canonical Old Testament harbingers of future salvation”<sup>101</sup>—while the Madonna and Child represent the “realization of their prophecies.”<sup>102</sup> The straight axis on which both the tomb and the altar are aligned offers a perceptible unification between the sacristy proper and the chapel. However, the relationship between the two rectangular entities is more than just a visual one. Roger Crum notes that the altar metaphorically doubles as the tomb of Christ; thus, the death and burial of Giovanni di Bicci, represented by the sarcophagus, symbolically mirrors the death and resurrection of Christ.<sup>103</sup>

## Donatello’s Sculptural Ornamentation

Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi (1386–1466), called Donatello, was unequivocally one of the most important sculptors of the Early Renaissance, revered and emulated for his multifarious

<sup>101</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 133.

<sup>102</sup> Crum, “Ascension,” 150.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

repertoire of figures and forms that often defied traditional standards. A prolific artist well versed in stone, bronze, stucco and wood, his works exhibit a range of expressions and emotions like those of no other sculptor. He was also one of the first Tuscan artists to travel to Rome with an express interest in extracting ideas from reliefs and statues discovered among ancient Roman ruins.<sup>104</sup> His first-hand observations and intense study of these ruins became the impetus for the application of decorative sculpture to the otherwise bare and purely architectonic interiors of the Old Sacristy,<sup>105</sup> much to the apparent chagrin of Brunelleschi. Although we have no way of verifying what parts of the sculptural decoration fell under the initial building program, it is held that the decoration did not commence until the building was completed.<sup>106</sup> Giovanni di Bicci's sarcophagus nevertheless points to an eventual shift in patronage from patriarch to offspring, as indicated by the reference to filial duty in the inscription on the tomb.<sup>107</sup> Cosimo de' Medici, who assumed full patronage upon Lorenzo's death in 1440, continued a precedent of commissions set forth by his father, which were "meant to redound to the honor of the Medici family and insure the family's continuity over time within the religious and civic fabric of the city."<sup>108</sup> Cosimo, an avid patron of the arts with a special affinity for sculpture, was well acquainted with many prominent artists and craftsmen and in his own residence kept a fine collection of works by important masters.<sup>109</sup> To help him bring his vision to fruition, Cosimo naturally called on an artist whom he favored above all others. Donatello, according to Vasari, was held in such high esteem that Cosimo kept him continually employed. So

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<sup>104</sup> Millon, *Renaissance*, 78. Manetti, *Life*, 52, notes that on Donatello's first trip to Rome, he was accompanied by Brunelleschi, and that they "originally went there in agreement about strictly sculptural matters, and they applied themselves constantly to these."

<sup>105</sup> Millon, *Renaissance*, 78.

<sup>106</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 47.

<sup>107</sup> Crum, "Ascension," 148.

<sup>108</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 47. Crum, "Ascension," 146, suggests that while Cosimo (and presumably Lorenzo) were more than likely the responsible forces behind the Sacristy's sculptural embellishment and furnishings, it is plausible that their father commissioned, or at least contemplated, their existence before his death.

<sup>109</sup> Bisticci, *Vespasiano Memoirs*, 224.

close were the two that when Donatello died in 1466, he was buried in a tomb near Cosimo's at San Lorenzo, so that "his body might be near him when dead as his spirit had been near him in life."<sup>110</sup>

There are no extant documents that verify Donatello's work at the Old Sacristy, a project he was awarded shortly after his return from his second Roman voyage; however, early sources including Manetti, Vespasiano, Filarete and Vasari give consistent and convincing testimony that he indeed was the artist responsible for the eight roundels and two arched over-door reliefs made of stucco and a pair of bronze doors on each side of the chapel opening. Dating his work, however, remains problematic due to the lack of concrete evidence, as well as to certain chronological contradictions among the aforementioned writers. Because Donatello's sacristy enterprise has no parallels to any of his previous works, it is difficult to fit into his overall artistic evolution. The only date we can be sure of is the completion of the architectural structure, in 1428.<sup>111</sup> Nevertheless, given the available evidence, scholars have generally agreed that the decorations were executed between 1434, when Cosimo returned to Florence from his one-year exile, and 1443, when Donatello left for a ten-year artistic spree in Padua.<sup>112</sup>

## The Stucco Reliefs

Considering that the doors are made of bronze, they must have taken a significant amount of time to create, whereas the stucco reliefs allowed for a reasonably expeditious execution. Stucco, as described by Vasari, is made from a mixture of crushed marble and lime from travertine.<sup>113</sup> As a medium, its appeal lies in its malleable and amenable properties, as it could be sculpted in a semi-hardened state and further details whittled with simple tools after it had dried. It was precisely

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<sup>110</sup> Giorgio Vasari, *Vasari's Lives of the Artists: Biographies of the Most Eminent Architects, Painters, and Sculptors of Italy*, ed. Betty Burroughs (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), 91.

<sup>111</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 133.

<sup>112</sup> John Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance Sculpture: An Introduction to Italian Sculpture* (New York: Vintage Books, 1985), 259.

<sup>113</sup> Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 127.

because the material dried so swiftly that stucco could be challenging; necessitating quick and direct execution, the results could sometimes be unfettered and expressionistic.<sup>114</sup> Donatello occasionally used very simple tools to work the stucco but mainly modeled with his hands; in fact, the 1985/86 restoration of the Sacristy revealed the clear imprint of his fingers in certain areas.<sup>115</sup> Given the roundels' location, stucco—sometimes mistaken for terracotta—was the most appropriate choice of material because it was considerably lighter than stone and would therefore not impose an excessive strain on the structure.<sup>116</sup>

The dedication of the sacristy and adjoining chapel to Saint John the Evangelist, Giovanni di Bicci's patron saint, clarifies the decision to depict alternating scenes of the Four Evangelists and four scenes from the Legend of Saint John the Evangelist in the stucco roundels.<sup>117</sup> Placed on the walls, the Evangelists symbolize the “most direct sources of the message of Christ” to the faithful,<sup>118</sup> while the reliefs on the pendentives, depicting scenes from the Legend, represent “death and resurrection, ascension and the last coming, narratives obviously appropriate for a funerary chapel.”<sup>119</sup> In light of the two different locations, Donatello gave special consideration to the circumstances under which each was seen, and compensated accordingly.<sup>120</sup> The polychromatic Legend scenes, executed in *schacciato*, include: *Saint John's Vision on Patmos*, the *Raising of Drusiana*, the *Martyrdom of Saint John* and the *Ascension of Saint John*. Since they are set at an approximately forty-five degree angle tilted toward the observer looking up from below, the resulting line of sight is

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<sup>114</sup> Christina Danti, “Observations After the Restoration,” in *Donatello at Close Range* (n.p.: Burlington Magazine Publications, 1987), 46.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.; Christina Danti, “Donatello's Stuccoes Restored: Scientific Examination and Art-historical Hypotheses,” in *Donatello at Close Range* (n.p.: Burlington Magazine Publications, 1987), 28.

<sup>116</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 133; Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 127.

<sup>117</sup> Crum, “Ascension,” 143.

<sup>118</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 193.

<sup>119</sup> Paoletti, “Bronze Doors,” 39.

<sup>120</sup> Robert Munman, “Optical Corrections in the Sculpture of Donatello,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s., 75, no. 2 (1985): 45.

perpendicular, and the roundels are intended to be viewed straight-on.<sup>121</sup> As such, Donatello likely did not feel compelled to compensate for the low vantage point of the observer, and he staged small-scale scenes with numerous figures situated in complex settings.<sup>122</sup> Furthermore, the figures are free of distortions, and the architectural perspective converges at a point approximately centered on the horizon line, save for one anomalous example, which will be discussed below.<sup>123</sup>

Donatello implies depth and perspective in each relief, and his theatrical backdrops are fully independent of the figures, or actors, that inhabit them.<sup>124</sup> Three of the four scenes take place amidst impressive architectural settings with converging vertical planes.<sup>125</sup> Although it is meant to be seen under the same conditions as its counterparts, the *Ascension of Saint John* (fig. 16) is most sensational



Figure 16. Donatello, stucco pendentive roundel, *Ascension of Saint John*.

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>122</sup> Munman, "Optical Corrections," 45-46; Poeschke, *Donatello and His World*, 396.

<sup>123</sup> Munman, "Optical Corrections," 8.

<sup>124</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 136.

<sup>125</sup> John White, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space* (Boston: Boston Book and Art Shop, 1967), 153.

in its use of perspective and manipulation of space. Donatello explicitly designed it in a *di sotto in su* perspective as a direct way of intensifying the drama for the observer.<sup>126</sup> By purposely situating the observer below the horizon line, Donatello placed an even greater emphasis on the miracle itself. Reminiscent of “fantastic photographs of skyscrapers,” the stability of the plunging parapet in the foreground counters the rapid, upward acceleration of the buildings’ planes, effecting a powerful dynamic.<sup>127</sup> This contrasting force compels the eye to follow the flight of Saint John’s body rising toward a welcoming Christ and further underscores the emotional quality of the event.<sup>128</sup>

While perhaps more straightforward in terms of perspective, the symmetrical and spacious setting of the *Raising of Drusiana* is a tour de force in its own right (fig. 17a). The self-contained hall is bordered by open arcades on three sides and covered by a barrel-vaulted ceiling.<sup>129</sup> The solidity of this monumental structure is neutralized by the figures that freely navigate through the airy passages. Situated in the midst of these excited witnesses, though right below the actual focal point, is the darkly garbed Drusiana, her miraculous resurrection unfolding before our—and her bystanders’—eyes.<sup>130</sup> In the *Martyrdom of Saint John* (fig. 17b), Donatello uses *repoussoir* by placing a towering structure to the right and overlapping figures to each side of the relief, which effectively pushes the viewer’s attention toward the heart of the action—the attempted martyrdom.<sup>131</sup> *Saint John’s Vision on Patmos* is the only one of the series that does not occur within an architectural setting (fig. 17c). In the form of trees, this panoramic landscape also contains converging verticals, a perspective tool that helps direct the eye toward the ascending angles of the dome’s ribs, relating the relief to the

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<sup>126</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 136; Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 155.

<sup>127</sup> White, *Birth and Rebirth*, 152.

<sup>128</sup> White, *Birth and Rebirth*, 152. Crum, “Ascension,” 141, 158, intriguingly asserts that the elderly man found at the extreme right side of the *Ascension* roundel is a portrait of Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici; depicted “as a reverent witness to the ascension of St. John, Giovanni di Bicci bridges the distance between the biblical past of his patron saint and the present promise of his own salvation.”

<sup>129</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 136.

<sup>130</sup> Poeschke, *Donatello and His World*, 396.

<sup>131</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 136.





Figure 17a. (left) Donatello, stucco pendentive roundel, *Raising of Drusiana*; Figure 17b. (center) Donatello, stucco pendentive roundel, *Martyrdom of Saint John*; Figure 17c. (right) Donatello, stucco pendentive roundel, *Saint John's Vision on Patmos*.

Sacristy's structural elements.<sup>132</sup> John White notes that this artistic, not scientific, device employed in these narrative reliefs "leads the eye towards the area of the center of the dome, uniting the roundels with the dark, converging ribs above them, just as the slight concavity of surface weds them to the pendentives into which they are set, and their content ties them to the room below."<sup>133</sup>

The four reliefs depicting the Evangelists are centered in the lunettes, with Saint John the Evangelist in the dominant position above the arch of the chapel's entrance (fig. 9). Unlike the pendentive roundels, which tilt conveniently toward the viewer, the Evangelist roundels are strictly vertical and, as such, present a more challenging view. Donatello treats them according to their placement by enlarging the figures and modeling the stucco with thicker layers.<sup>134</sup> Most importantly, he constructs both the furniture and figures with strong *di sotto in su* effects, hangs the feet and garments over the edge of the floor and slightly slants the tops of the tables upward to suggest views from below.<sup>135</sup>

<sup>132</sup> Munman, "Optical Corrections," 46.

<sup>133</sup> White, *Birth and Rebirth*, 154.

<sup>134</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 136.

<sup>135</sup> Munman, "Optical Corrections," 45.



Each Evangelist, seated on a grand throne behind a massive desk decorated with an antique Roman motif, is pictured in the act of intense reading, writing or meditating (figs. 18a-d). The elaborate classical patterns that Donatello applied to the furniture are striking, and surely done in an



Figure 18a. (top left) Donatello, stucco wall roundel, *Saint John the Evangelist*; Figure 18b. (top right) Donatello, stucco wall roundel, *Saint Mark*; Figure 18c. (bottom left) Donatello, stucco wall roundel, *Saint Luke*; Figure 18d. (bottom right) Donatello, stucco wall roundel, *Saint Matthew*.

attempt to add some “antique ‘gravitas’ to the considerations of these four Christians.”<sup>136</sup> Each throne, revealing an interest in late Imperial sculpture, differs from the next. Three of the four desks are actual lecterns, while the one Saint Luke utilizes is more like a table than a lectern. A classical egg-and-dart pattern spans the width of each floor and is grounded atop an angel-head with outstretched wings.<sup>137</sup> As for the Evangelists themselves, their poses, garments and countenances are apparently derived from Byzantine traditions.<sup>138</sup> Accompanying them are their respective traditional symbols, originating from Ezekiel’s vision, which symbolically proclaim the different characters of the Gospel: “the angel of Matthew for his account of Christ’s incarnation, the lion for S. Mark because he emphasizes Christ as lion of Judah, the sacrificial bull for S. Luke because he writes of Christ’s priesthood, and S. John’s eagle as a sign of inspiration.”<sup>139</sup> Each of the “animated lecterns” are situated atop the desks and three of the four serve as props for the books.<sup>140</sup> The beasts appear as docile companions, while the Evangelists themselves are deeply engrossed in their work. The men are composed and self-motivated, and absent are any outward indications of inspiration. In this way, Donatello has concentrated on the exercise of composing from a humanistic standpoint, rather than a divine one, and has thus portrayed “his Evangelists as scholars, engaged in cerebral not mechanical acts.”<sup>141</sup>

Donatello’s stucco over-door reliefs on the altar wall (figs. 19a-b), corresponding to the bronze doors below, feature a pair of standing martyrs: Saints Stephen and Lawrence (patron saint of San Lorenzo) to the left and Saints Cosmas and Damian (patron saints of the Medici family) to the right. The wide stucco frames that surround the figures are ornamented with plant tendrils rising

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<sup>136</sup> Greenhalgh, *Donatello*, 121.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 136.

<sup>139</sup> Greenhalgh, *Donatello*, 119.

<sup>140</sup> Poeschke, *Donatello and His World*, 395.

<sup>141</sup> Greenhalgh, *Donatello*, 119.

out of vases, a classical motif Donatello may have noticed during his studies in Rome.<sup>142</sup> The stucco figures appear to have a finer finish than the roundels, and the folds of the garments are delicate and fluid, an effect that was likely achieved by lightly coating the stucco, nearly dry, with a wet brush. When seen from certain angles, the heads of the saints deceptively appear in the round, although they are actually modeled in high relief. Like the Evangelist roundels, here too the saints' feet gently



Figure 19a. (left) Donatello, stucco over-door relief, *Saints Stephen and Lawrence*;  
Figure 19b. (right) Donatello, stucco over-door relief, *Saints Cosmas and Damian*.

overlap the ledge of the frame.<sup>143</sup> Saints Stephen and Lawrence each carry a palm branch and display their respective symbols of martyrdom—the former with a large stone in his forehead and the latter with a gridiron. Saints Cosmas and Damian were brothers known for their healing practices and, as such, are portrayed holding a spoon for dispensing cures.<sup>144</sup>

Featuring Saints Stephen and Lawrence may simply be a reference to the dedication of the church as a whole, while Saints Cosmas and Damian seem to be equally straightforward references

<sup>142</sup> Poeschke, *Donatello and His World*, 395.

<sup>143</sup> Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 128–129.

<sup>144</sup> Paoletti, “Bronze Doors,” 48.

to the Medici; in coupling the two pairs, therefore, a logical connection is made between the church and the main family that supported its rebuilding.<sup>145</sup> However, the references are probably more specific than that, as noted by John Paoletti. According to Paoletti:

As representations of the patronymic saints for Lorenzo and Cosimo, these two reliefs over the doors identify the new patrons of the sacristy just as the narrative tondi of St. John in the pendentives identify its first patron. The presence of two generations of the Medici in the stucco relief decorations of the chapel, comparable to their presence in inscriptions on the sarcophagus in the middle of the building, asserts the function of the sacristy as a family chapel and mausoleum within the greater context of the church.<sup>146</sup>

## The Bronze Doors

The most problematical components of Donatello's sculptural decoration are the bronze doors and their porticoes and, as such, they are deserving of a separate analysis (figs. 9, 20a and 21a).<sup>147</sup> Cast in about 1440, they were probably ready for installation shortly before Donatello's departure for Padua.<sup>148</sup> Because the doors have somewhat perplexing iconographical programs and, in certain respects, are stylistically distinct, a consensus in interpretation among scholars has not been reached. Manetti and Filarete refer to them disapprovingly in their writings; the former specifically mentions the door's porticoes, presenting us with the first testimony of Brunelleschi's displeasure with Donatello's work, which effectively terminated a long-standing friendship.<sup>149</sup> Referring to Donatello as "proud and arrogant," Manetti claims that "his works in the sacristy,

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid. Danti, "Observations After the Restoration," 47, notes that although the stucco over-door reliefs were part of a single design campaign, the restoration of 1985/96 revealed that the two pairs of saints appear to have been executed by two different hands—those of Donatello and an unidentified assistant, possibly Michelozzo.

<sup>147</sup> Manetti, *Life*, 108, says that the doors were left until the patrons could decide "whether [they] should be made of wood or another material."

<sup>148</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 138. Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 47, notes that "Given Donatello's stay in Rome in 1432–33 and the Medici's exile from Florence from October 1433 to October 1434, Donatello may, like Buggiano, have worked on the decoration of the sacristy between 1429 and 1432. Given the extensive nature of his sculpture there in stucco and bronze, the later dating seems the more reasonable one, especially in view of the outstanding commissions in Donatello's shop during the late 1420s and early 1430s."

<sup>149</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 139, suggests that the "alien and disturbing" porticoes that surround the bronze doors were executed by Michelozzo.

individually and collectively, never had the blessing of Filippo.”<sup>150</sup> Shortly after the doors were completed, Filarete said, in Book XXIII of his *Treatise on Architecture*, “If you have to do Apostles, do not make them appear to be fencers as Donatello did . . . It is well to pose the figures in such a way that their nature shows to advantage, but [one should] not wish to show so much skill that he falls into the vice of deformity.”<sup>151</sup> Filarete was borrowing directly from a notion previously set forth by Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise of 1435, *On Painting*. Although the passage does not specifically refer to Donatello’s doors, Alberti reflects similar sentiments concerning decorum and dignity. “A runner,” Alberti said, “is expected to throw his hands and feet, but I prefer a philosopher while he is talking to show much more modesty than skill in fencing.”<sup>152</sup> Despite these instances of disapproval, when the doors are considered both stylistically and iconographically within the overall context of the sacristy’s decoration, they may be deemed innovative responses to the task of conveying the patron’s dynastic ambitions.<sup>153</sup>

In design, the doors are quite simple, and each set contains ten almost-square panels (figs. 20a-b and 21a-b). Unlike Andrea Pisano’s and Lorenzo Ghiberti’s narrative scenes from the doors of the Florentine Baptistery, each of these panels contains two standing figures of saints set against a plain background. The left set, in which most figures carry a martyr’s palm, has been called the *Martyrs Door*, while the set to the right has been called the *Apostles Door*, though somewhat erroneously; in addition to the Apostles, it also includes images of the Four Evangelists, Saint John

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<sup>150</sup> Manetti, *Life*, 108.

<sup>151</sup> Filarete, *Treatise on Architecture: Being the Treatise by Antonio di Piero Averlino, known as Filarete*, trans. John R. Spencer, vol. 2, *The Translation* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1965), 306. Although he was critical of Donatello’s figures represented on the bronze doors, Filarete, *Treatise*, 323, nevertheless indicated a respect for him as a sculptor, later remarking on the Old Sacristy: “it is decorated as much as it ought to be, down to the doors made in bronze by Donatello, a most worthy sculptor.” This is emphasized earlier in his *Treatise*, 113, when he discusses his projected plans for the imaginary Cathedral of Sforzinda, containing three bronze doors. Filarete commissioned two doors to Ghiberti, while he and Donatello would create the third; in this way, he implied that he respected Donatello’s craftsmanship enough to entrust him with this task, theoretical though it may have been.

<sup>152</sup> Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1966), 73. Alberti originally wrote *De Pictura* in Latin in 1435, followed by the 1436 Italian version, *Della Pittura*.

<sup>153</sup> Paoletti, “Bronze Doors,” 39.



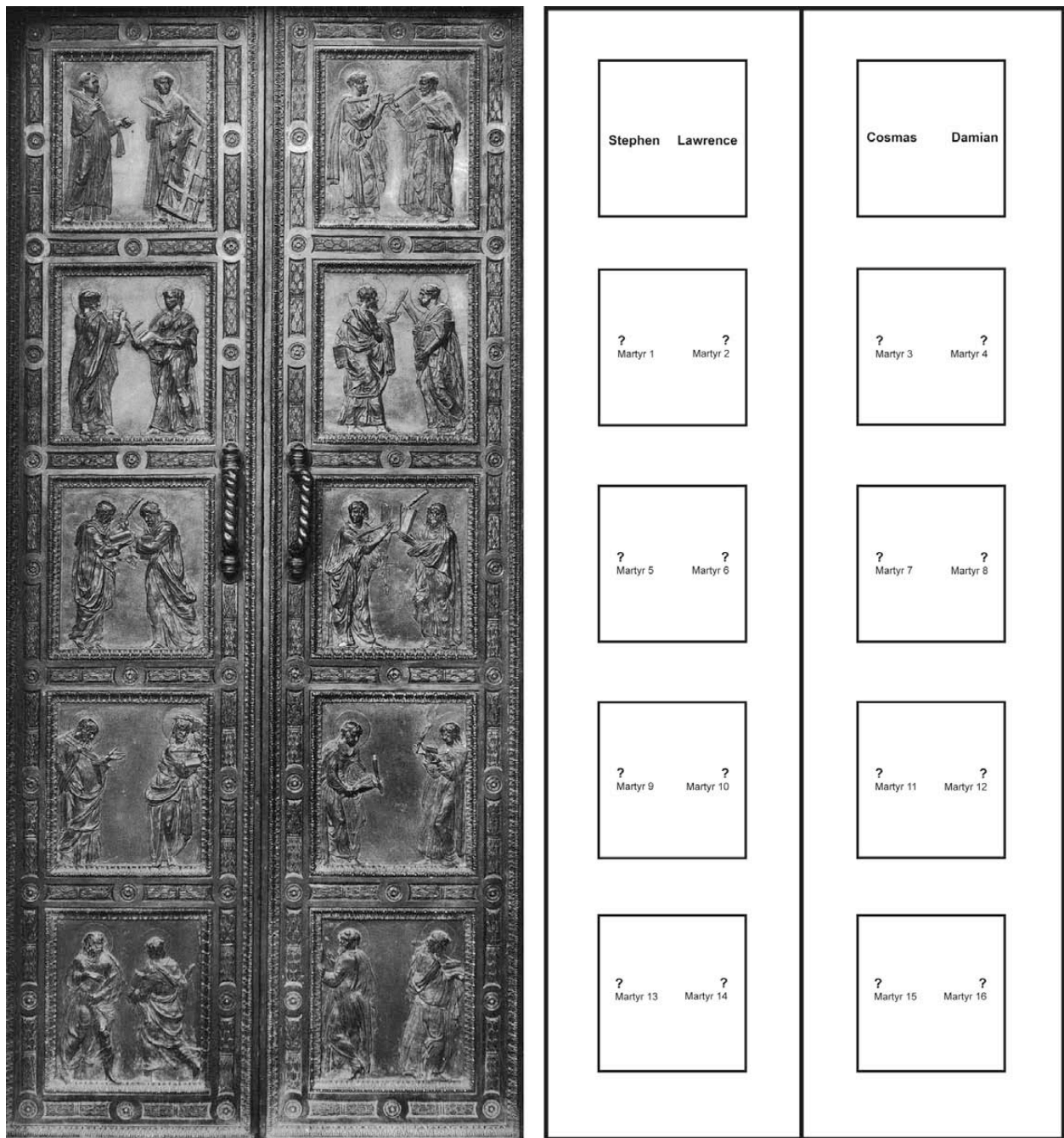


Figure 20a. (left) Donatello, *Martyrs Door*; Figure 20b. (right) Diagram of the *Martyrs Door* (reconstructed by author).

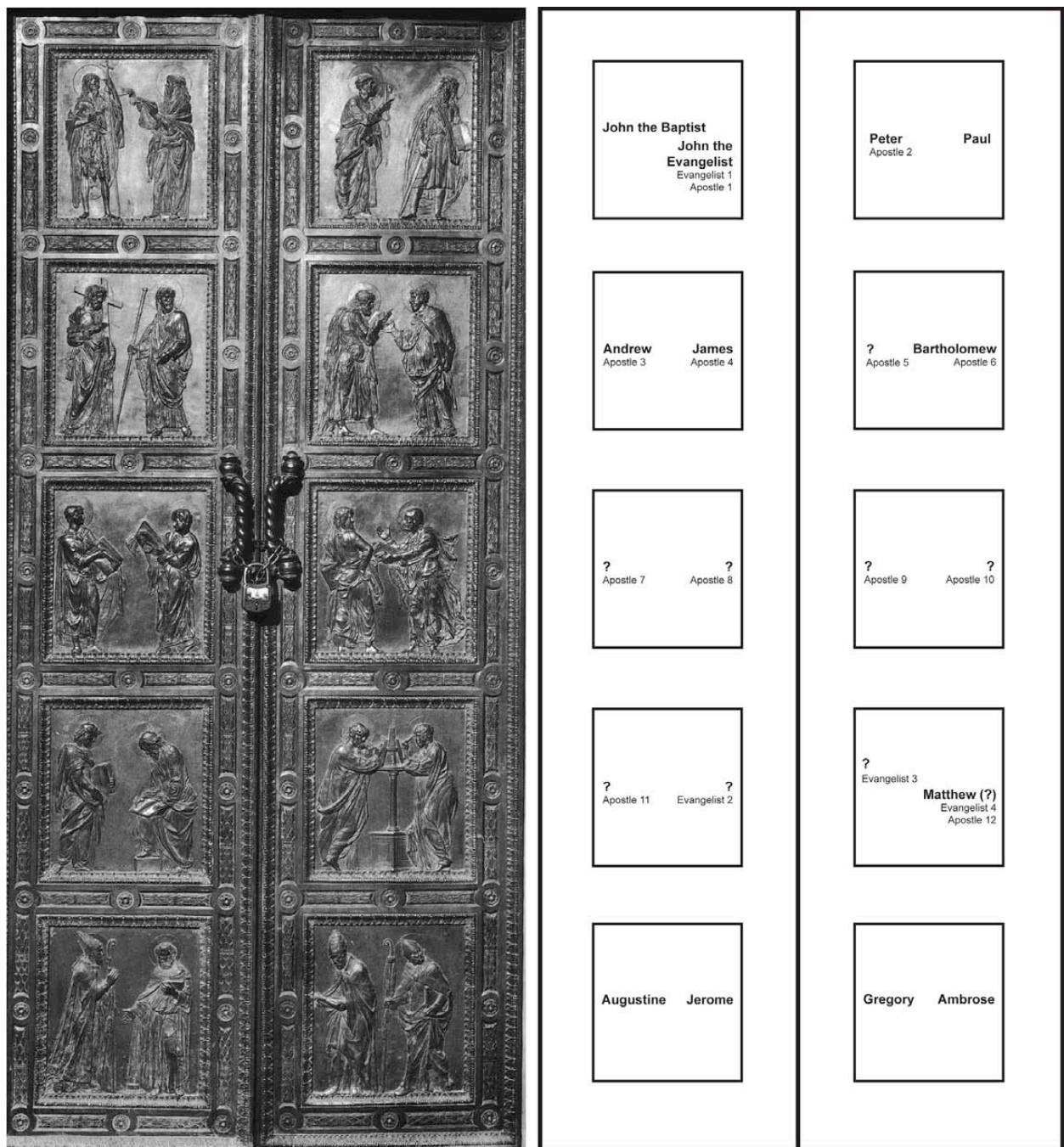


Figure 21a. (left) Donatello, *Apostles Door*; Figure 21b. (right) Diagram of the *Apostles Door* (reconstructed by author).

the Baptist, Saint Paul and the Four Church Doctors.<sup>154</sup> The vivacious postures and gestures of the doors' figures, so close in spirit to the figures on Donatello's own *Cantoria* (fig. 22), help establish a relationship between each in the pair. John Pope-Hennessy says of their interplay: "Sometimes this is a conversation on equal terms; sometimes one Saint disturbs another who is meditating at the side;



Figure 22. Donatello, *Cantoria*, detail, 1433–1438, Museo dell' Opera del Duomo, Florence.

sometimes they meet unexpectedly and salute each other with their palms; and sometimes, as though late for an appointment, they just hurry by.”<sup>155</sup> By exploiting a range of possibilities within a simple two-man pattern (figs. 23a-d), Donatello has characterized a striking variety of interactions among humans engaged in passionate discourse.<sup>156</sup> By keeping the figures at a consistent scale and emphasizing their relationship to their respective frames—some seem to hold onto it, some lean up against it, some are tucked behind it, some cross over it, while almost all of their feet overlap it—Donatello indicates their position in the foreground.<sup>157</sup> Filarete's reference to the figures' appearance as “fencers” corroborates an interpretation of the Saints and Apostles as being engaged in a sort of combat on behalf of the Church. Some historians have specifically connected them with delegates from the Greek and Roman Churches who vehemently argued with one another during a Council

<sup>154</sup> Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 150.

<sup>155</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance*, 17.

<sup>156</sup> Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 150.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 152–153.





Figures 23a-b. (top row) Donatello, *Martyrs Door*, details; Figures 23c-d (bottom row) Donatello, *Apostles Door*, details.

called to reunite the two factions.<sup>158</sup> The Council originally convened in Ferrara in 1438, but after deliberations dragged on fruitlessly for some months, Cosimo de' Medici was instrumental in getting it moved to Florence, while the Medici Bank assumed the associated costs.<sup>159</sup> The gravity of this event, to be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, surely impressed the people of

<sup>158</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 196–197.

<sup>159</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 196; Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 179.

Florence. A successful, though short-lived, conclusion was eventually announced, and all eyes of Christendom were focused on Florence during this exciting time.<sup>160</sup> Because Cosimo and Lorenzo were deeply involved in what transpired, allusions to their civic and religious connections would understandably be made within their familial mausoleum.<sup>161</sup>

To find the various sources for Donatello's doors, we must first turn to the doorjambs at the Pisa Baptistry, whose saints and apostles are similarly represented in pairs.<sup>162</sup> However, the figures are elongated and the faces and drapery are typically Romanesque in style, quite dissimilar from Donatello's toga-like garments.<sup>163</sup> The generic saints and martyrs featured on the bronze doors of San Paolo fuori le Mura, which lack any particular identifying feature besides their books and palm branches, presumably did not go unnoticed by Donatello during his travels to Rome.<sup>164</sup> Janson points to early Christian ivory diptychs, specifically the Probianus Diptych dating roughly to 400 AD (fig. 24). In addition to the paired figures in the subpanels, he points out that, "Here, and only here, do we find the same near square proportion of the panels, the same kind of ornamented molding, and a strikingly similar relationship of the figures to the frame and the background of the relief."<sup>165</sup> As for the panels' frames, the placement of rosettes was prefigured in Bonanus' doors at the Cathedral of Pisa.<sup>166</sup> However, Donatello's adaptations of different sources and his keen observations of human mannerisms resulted in a fresh and imaginative synthesis.

Although there is no particular stylistic relationship between Donatello's sacristy doors and other fifteenth-century figured bronze doors, it is important to note, as John Paoletti did, that Donatello's were the only ones used in a private context, that is, a family chapel. This select group

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<sup>160</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 197.

<sup>161</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 64.

<sup>162</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Italian Renaissance*, 17. Poeschke, *Donatello and His World*, 407, notes that Donatello was in Pisa between April 1426 and August 1428 working with Michelozzo on the Tomb of Rinaldo Brancacci.

<sup>163</sup> Greenhalgh, *Donatello*, 118.

<sup>164</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 60.

<sup>165</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 136–137.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 137–138



Figure 24. Consular diptych of Rufus Probianus, c. 400 A.D, Staatsbibliothek, Berlin.

of Quattrocento doors includes Ghiberti's north and east doors of the Florence Baptistery; Filarete's doors for the main portal of Old Saint Peter's and the fictitious doors he proposed for the Cathedral of the imaginary city of Sforzinda; Luca della Robbia's sacristy doors for the Cathedral of Florence; and finally, Donatello's own unexecuted doors for the Opera of Siena Cathedral, which were to rival Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise*.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, this was the only occasion when bronze doors were used in an interior setting until Luca della Robbia completed his doors for the sacristy of the Cathedral in 1464.<sup>168</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, bronze doors were strictly designated for important public

<sup>167</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 52-53. Poeschke, *Donatello and His World*, 414, notes that Donatello originally received the commission for the sacristy doors of the Cathedral of Florence in 1437, but the contract was later turned over to Luca della Robbia in 1446.

<sup>168</sup> Poeschke, *Donatello and His World*, 395.

projects, even those that were privately commissioned.<sup>169</sup> In a marked deviation from convention, Cosimo appropriated a medium normally reserved for civic use and adapted it to fit within the context of his private family chapel, not coincidentally at the same time the Medici family was strengthening its political and economic grip on the Florentine Republic.<sup>170</sup>

Although it may be possible to say that the doors were simply a means for illustrating conventional groupings of Christian figures—Martyrs, Apostles, Evangelists and Church Fathers—rather than for making specific references to the Medici, the latter hypothesis also seems reasonable, given what we know about the family.<sup>171</sup> While a number of the saints are easily distinguished by their attributes, others are more generic, and their identities are uncertain. On the *Martyrs Door*, the four topmost saints are Stephen, Lawrence, Cosmas and Damian—the same saints featured in the stucco over-door reliefs—followed by sixteen other martyrs, identified only by their palm branches and books (figs. 20a-b).<sup>172</sup> The program of the *Apostles Door* is more complicated, but certain figures are easily recognizable (figs. 21a-b). Saints Augustine, Jerome, Gregory and Ambrose, the four Doctors or Fathers of the Church, occupy the bottom row.<sup>173</sup> On the top row, only three of the figures are identifiable: Saint John the Baptist wears a hair-shirt and carries a staff, while Saints Peter and Paul, in the adjacent panel to the right, bear their keys and sword, respectively. In all likelihood, John the Baptist is coupled with John the Evangelist, a recognition made possible because the pairing is commonplace. Below them, in the second row, the two figures stationed in the left panel are identified as Saint Andrew by his cross and Saint James by his pilgrim's staff; the figure to the far right, with his knife, is Saint Bartholomew; the fourth figure is unidentifiable but is likely another

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<sup>169</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 53.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 58–59.

<sup>171</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 196.

<sup>172</sup> Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 150; Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 138.

<sup>173</sup> Paoletti, "Bronze Doors," 45, notes that the identification of Augustine and Ambrose are interchangeable, since they bear no marks of distinction other than a bishop's ceremonial garments and a crosier.

Apostle.<sup>174</sup> The identification of the remaining figures on the *Apostles Door* gets quite convoluted at this point. The eight Saints in rows three and four bear no individual attributes with the exception of the second, third and fourth figures in row four, who carry quills and are engaged in composing, which leads one to believe that they are Evangelists. Obviously, this becomes problematic, because, as Janson points out, the first figure in this row, who should logically be the fourth Evangelist, possesses no such writing utensil; furthermore, John the Evangelist is already found in the top row, and it would be hard to imagine that Donatello featured him twice.<sup>175</sup> Keeping in mind that two of the Apostles were also Evangelists (Saints Matthew and John the Evangelist), Janson explains the perplexing arrangement in this way:

the first figure in the fourth row (the one without the quill) is the missing twelfth apostle, substituted for St. John the Evangelist (who, because of his special importance as the patron Saint of Giovanni d'Averardo de' Medici, has been placed in the top row, alongside John the Baptist, the patron Saint of Florence). By means of this bold placement, Donatello has achieved a coherent scheme that reconciles traditional iconography with the special requirements of the Medici: the four fathers (bottom row), the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark and Luke in the fourth row, John in the first), the twelve apostles (two in the first row, four each in the second and third, and two in the fourth), plus St. Paul and St. John the Baptist (first row).<sup>176</sup>

Further expounding on Janson's interpretation, Paoletti offers some possible explanations in the context of not only traditional iconography, but also contemporary historical events as they relate directly to the Medici family. The appearance of John the Baptist, patron saint of Florence, is a logical one, yet it marks the first time his presence has been connected with Medici iconography. As with the medium of the doors themselves, another civic image has been appropriated for private use. While the inclusion of John the Baptist could simply be excused under the guise of his traditional pairing with John the Evangelist, Paoletti points out that "at a time when Cosimo was consolidating

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<sup>174</sup> Janson, *Sculpture of Donatello*, 138.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid. The identification of Saint Matthew, on the far right side of row four of the *Apostles Door*, as shown in figure 21b, is interchangeable with Saints Luke and Mark (Evangelist 2 or 3) on the same row, since each Evangelist is shown engaged in the act of writing, with no attribute more specific than a quill.

his power within the state and beginning to make an equation between Medici power and Florentine power, he has used the civic reference of the Baptist as a family reference, visually joining the Medici and the state.”<sup>177</sup> As patron saint of Giovanni di Bicci de’ Medici, John the Evangelist’s presence is straightforward. Furthermore, Saint John was both an Apostle and Evangelist, a circumstance that may, perhaps, account for why groupings of both were included on the *Apostles Door*.<sup>178</sup> Peter and Paul, located in the topmost right panel, are standard symbolic references to the papacy, specifically recalling not only the fortune Giovanni di Bicci amassed after the Medici Bank secured the papal account, but also the fact the Pope Eugenius IV fled Rome in 1434 and took refuge in Florence for nine years, all the while remaining in office.<sup>179</sup> More than simple space-fillers, the four Church Doctors carried out the original teachings of John the Evangelist; furthermore, it should not be overlooked that Ghiberti had previously included them in similar positions on the bottom row of the North Doors of the Florentine Baptistery, yet another way to capitalize on the civic-private equation.<sup>180</sup> But aside from these associations, Paoletti has made another compelling suggestion. Donatello’s sculptural program, viewed in descending order from the prominently placed roundel of John the Evangelist, down to the two over-door stucco reliefs of Stephen, Lawrence, Cosmas and Damian, and finally to John the Evangelist and Peter in bronze door reliefs, represents a “clear hierarchy of three generations of descent in the male line of the Medici family”: original patron, Giovanni di Bicci; Cosimo and Lorenzo; and finally Piero and Giovanni, heirs to Cosimo.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Paoletti, “Bronze Doors,” 61.

<sup>178</sup> Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 150.

<sup>179</sup> Paoletti, “Bronze Doors,” 61.

<sup>180</sup> Bennett and Wilkins, *Donatello*, 150; Paoletti, “Bronze Doors,” 58. See *ibid.*, 61–64, for further explication of Saints Andrew, James and Bartholomew, the only three identified figures on the door for which there are no apparent familial, dynastic, or political connections.

<sup>181</sup> Paoletti, “Bronze Doors,” 50. See *ibid.*, 50–51, for an explanation as to why Lorenzo’s two sons, Francesco (birth date unknown) and Pierfrancesco (born 1430), were not represented in a similar manner on the *Martyrs Door* beneath the saintly reference to their father, nor why a reference to Carlo (born 1430), Cosimo’s illegitimate son, was also absent from the *Apostles Door*.



## Chapter 4: The Painting

The fresco of a glimmering night sky that covers the hemispherical dome of the chapel (fig. 25), accounting for the third and final component of the unification of the visual arts at the Old Sacristy, has been the subject of much curiosity and debate. While the seemingly tireless efforts of scholars have given rise to a tide of interpretations regarding its authorship, dating and iconographic significance, the astronomical painting remains enigmatic. During the Middle Ages, astronomical illustrations showed little concern for scientific veracity; however, during the early years of the Quattrocento, with the discovery of Ptolemy's *Cosmographia*, or *Geographia*, there developed a better



Figure 25. Chapel dome with astronomical fresco painting.

understanding amongst learned Florentine men of matters of astronomy and cartography.<sup>182</sup> Vespasiano pointed out that in addition to his sophisticated repertoire of artistic interests, humanist philosophies, business acumen and political undertakings, Cosimo de' Medici also had a curiosity about, and complete knowledge of, astrology "from having practiced it with Maestro Pagolo [Toscanelli] and other astrologers" and "always made use of it in his affairs."<sup>183</sup> Toscanelli was a physician, mathematician and astronomer who kept the company of elite Florentine artists, including Brunelleschi and Leon Battista Alberti.<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, as suggested by Samuel Edgerton, Jr., Toscanelli's fundamental cartographic ideas were of great import to Renaissance artists in Florence.<sup>185</sup> As a result, painters were not merely studding vaults with haphazard stellar arrangements, but now had the capabilities of arranging constellations to represent specific times and dates.<sup>186</sup>

In light of this, James Beck has offered what he considers to be three candidates who might have been capable of masterminding such a composition. Contenders not only had to possess the ability to calculate an illusory perspective and personify each figure in proper scale and proportion within the confines of the dome's convex curvature, but also had to be knowledgeable about the tenets of astronomy.<sup>187</sup> Just as astonishing is the free-hand manner in which the artist appears to have executed the painting.<sup>188</sup> The 1985/86 restoration of the chapel revealed that the azurite blue fresco was painted entirely *a secco*, but that the artist was not aided by any type of preliminary transfer

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<sup>182</sup> Brown, "Laetentur Caeli," 178; Samuel Y. Edgerton, Jr., "Florentine Interest in Ptolemaic Cartography as Background for Renaissance Painting, Architecture, and the Discovery of America," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 33, no. 4 (1974): 278.

<sup>183</sup> Bisticci, *Vespasiano Memoirs*, 224.

<sup>184</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 192. Bisticci, *Vespasiano Memoirs*, 224, 419, notes that Cosimo and Toscanelli were both executors of Niccolò Niccoli's will.

<sup>185</sup> Edgerton, "Ptolemaic Cartography," 275.

<sup>186</sup> Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, "Classical Mythology in Mediaeval Art," *Metropolitan Museum Studies* 4, no. 2 (1933): 234.

<sup>187</sup> James Beck, "Leon Battista Alberti and the *Night Sky* at San Lorenzo," *Artibus et Historiae* 10, no. 19 (1989): 15.

<sup>188</sup> Isabella Lapi Ballerini, "The Celestial Hemisphere of the Old Sacristy and Its Restoration," in *Donatello at Close Range* (n.p.: Burlington Magazine Publications, 1987), 51.



drawings.<sup>189</sup> In fact, the mural seems to have been carried out more as a drawing than a traditional painting in the way that the stellar arrangements, personifications and zodiac symbols were first outlined in red ochre, directly on top of a thick layer of *intonaco*, then later traced with vine black and lead white.<sup>190</sup>

Toscanelli and Brunelleschi, two of the men Beck briefly considers as possible candidates for master painter, he quickly eliminates. The former is discounted on the grounds of an inadequate ability to draw, and the latter because evidence of his style in drawing or painting is completely lacking—besides which, Brunelleschi’s current architectural work on the Cathedral’s dome and the Basilica of San Lorenzo would have demanded too much of his time.<sup>191</sup> Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), Beck maintains, is the only plausible candidate capable of formulating the astronomical composition, as well as actually painting it.<sup>192</sup> Alberti was, in essence, a self-taught man, at least in artistic matters, and did not receive the kind of formal training that other artists at the time did.<sup>193</sup> Renowned for his work as an architect, he was first and foremost a writer who authored a seminal series of artistic treatises, a humanist, and an intellectual student of the classics, canon law, and Latin.<sup>194</sup> In his first treatise, *On Painting*, Alberti makes ample reference to his interest in the art, but gives the impression of being more of a dabbling amateur than a professional; this could explain why the unusual *a secco* technique was employed rather than the more rigorous *buon fresco*.<sup>195</sup> Nonetheless, he acquired a vast amount of knowledge on the subject and put it into practice.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Beck, “Leon Battista Alberti,” 13; Ballerini, “Celestial Hemisphere,” 51.

<sup>191</sup> Beck, “Leon Battista Alberti,” 15.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid. Ballerini, “Celestial Hemisphere,” 52, says that during the course of the fresco’s restoration, the presence of a second artist, probably a workshop assistant, was revealed. Although Beck, “Leon Battista Alberti,” 25–26, agrees with this point, he and Ballerini reach almost opposite conclusions as to who was responsible—master, assistant, or both—for the execution of individual personifications.

<sup>193</sup> Beck, “Leon Battista Alberti,” 11, 13.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., Beck points out that Alberti “prided himself on having done recognizable portraits from memory, even after not having seen the person for a year, and indeed paid considerable attention to the importance of recognition.”

Patricia Fortini Brown notes that an integral part of the chapel fresco is the “act of measurement,” which unquestionably “involves time as much as space.” Furthermore, she says, “It is a kind of astronomical clock such as showed the movements of sun, moon and stars of the zodiac, all on a single dial, but immobile and fixed at one particular moment.”<sup>197</sup> Determining the particular moment depicted in the astronomical arrangement, however, has proved to be a challenge. Since Aby Warburg first attempted to do so in 1911, arguments have mostly revolved around dates that are of particular consequence for the Medici.<sup>198</sup> Warburg concluded that the day represented was July 9, 1422, in honor of the consecration of the high altar of San Lorenzo.<sup>199</sup> Subsequently, Alessandro Parronchi proposed a date of July 16, 1416, in commemoration of the birth date of Cosimo de’ Medici’s first son, Piero (1416–1469); he also ascribes its creation to Giuliano d’Arrigo (1367–1446), called Pesello, a Florentine painter of some repute, but by whom, unfortunately, no documented works exist to support this hypothesis.<sup>200</sup> Isabella Lapi Ballerina, the curator in charge of the 1985/86 restoration of the Old Sacristy, wrote a detailed paper in 1988 proposing the date of either July 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> of 1442, but what event actually transpired on either day has not been determined.<sup>201</sup> Perhaps the most persuasive arguments thus far are those of Patricia Fortini Brown.

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<sup>197</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 178.

<sup>198</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 178; Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici*, 193.

<sup>199</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 176. See Aby Warburg, “Die astronomische Himmelsdarstellung im Gewölbe der alten Sakristei von San Lorenzo in Florenz,” *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 2 (1912-17): 34-36.

<sup>200</sup> Ballerini, “Celestial Hemisphere,” 51. See Alessandro Parronchi, “L’Emisfero della Sacrestia Vecchia: Giuliano Pesello?” in *Scritti di storia dell’arte in onore di Federico Zeri* 1, ed. Mauro Natale (Milan, 1984): 134–146. See also, by the same author, “L’Emisfero settentrionale della Sagrestia Vecchia,” in *San Lorenzo, La Basilica, la Sagrestia, le Cappelle, la Biblioteca*, ed. U. Baldini and B. Nardini (Florence, 1984): 73; and id., *Il Cielo notturno della Sacrestia Vecchia di San Lorenzo* (Florence: Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana, n. d., ca. 1982).

<sup>201</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici*, 193; see Isabella Lapi Ballerini, “Gli emisferi celesti della Sagrestia Vecchia e della Cappella Pazzi,” *Rinascimento* 28 (1988): 321–355. Kent, *Cosimo de’ Medici*, 193, determined that the only noteworthy event of July, 1442, was the visit to Florence of René of Anjou, who arrived on the 15<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> of that month. Pointing out that the misalignment of dates “is no real problem,” she dismisses the claim altogether, however, saying that although Cosimo was interested in developing amicable ties with the Angevins, a letter written to his son Giovanni reveals his misgivings about such a political alliance; thus Cosimo would hardly have felt comfortable with making reference to it in his family mausoleum.

Aided by computer-based astronomical tables, she arrived at a date of July 6, 1439 (around twelve noon): the very day on which the Council of Florence came to a triumphant close.<sup>202</sup>

As briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, the Council of Florence was not only an important event for Cosimo de' Medici personally, but for all of Christendom as well. The meeting of the Greek and Roman Churches in 1439 was the revival of a failed Council held in Basel in 1431. Distrustful of its intentions, Pope Eugenius IV dissolved the Council of Basel within a few months, much to the dismay of the public, which viewed his papacy as antithetical to measures of reform.<sup>203</sup> Following this, the Pope was expelled from Rome in 1434 and took refuge in Florence, where he was supported by Cosimo de' Medici.<sup>204</sup> Eugenius reconvened the Council in Ferrara on his own terms in 1438, but it proved no more successful—papal funds were depleted on account of supporting the large Greek delegation, and the threat of plague loomed during the summer months.<sup>205</sup> Cosimo, acting as *Gonfalonier* (standard-bearer) of the Republic, seized the opportunity to finance the transfer of the Council to Florence.<sup>206</sup> After contentious disputes lasting roughly six months, on July 5, 1439, “the Articles of Union between Eastern and Western Christendom were signed by the Latin and Greek delegates, affirming the Pope as teacher and father of all Christians and head of the Church Universal, deriving his power directly from Christ.” The following day was declared the Day of Union, and the Florentine *popolo* celebrated accordingly.<sup>207</sup> Vespasiano solemnly relates that it was “a very wonderful thing to behold this goodly ceremony,” in which all of the civil and religious representatives gathered in dignified reconciliation.<sup>208</sup> Pope Eugenius presided over a

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<sup>202</sup> Kent, *Cosimo de' Medici*, 193; Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 178. The date of July 6, 1439, was originally proposed and subsequently disregarded by Arthur Beer, “Astronomical Dating of Works of Art,” *Vistas in Astronomy* 9 (1967), 187–189.

<sup>203</sup> James Loughlin, “Pope Eugene IV,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* 5 (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909).

<sup>204</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 178.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>206</sup> Janet Cox-Rearick, *Dynasty and Destiny in Medici Art: Pontormo, Leo X, and the Two Cosimos* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 167; Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 179.

<sup>207</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 179.

<sup>208</sup> Bisticci, *Vespasiano Memoirs*, 26.

mass, reading the scriptures in both Latin and Greek, and triumphantly concluded the Council by issuing a papal bull that began, “Laetentur caeli et exultet terra . . .” (“Let the heavens be glad and let the earth rejoice . . .”).<sup>209</sup>

Alberti, after almost ten years away from Florence, returned with the transference of the Council in 1439.<sup>210</sup> If he was indeed responsible for designing and painting the fresco, as Beck argued, then we must assume that he did so shortly after the dissolution of the Council, when feelings of exhilaration were still palpable.<sup>211</sup> While attributing the fresco to Alberti makes for an intriguing and satisfying proposition, the real import of the painting lies in the specifically Medicean message encoded among the glimmering orchestration of celestial meridians, astronomical constellations and elegantly mannered personifications that levitate above the chapel. Just as Donatello would subsequently do with his “fencers” waging battle on behalf of the Church, the master of the dome painting configured the heavens over the chapel in such a way as to associate the Medici with the longed-for unification of Christendom.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 179, notes that the phrase, from I Chronicles 16. 31, “appeared in a hymn of thanks to the Lord by King David after the Ark of the Covenant had been returned to Jerusalem.”

<sup>210</sup> Beck, “Leon Battista Alberti,” 17.

<sup>211</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 179.

<sup>212</sup> Brown, “Laetentur Caeli,” 180. It should be noted the favorable results of the Council were short-lived. For an in-depth account of the Council of Florence, the “success that failed,” see Joseph Gill, *Personalities of The Council of Florence and Other Essays* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964), 4; and id., *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

The Old Sacristy at San Lorenzo was the first instance in which the Medici commissioned the most illustrious contemporary artists to embellish the core of their city with works of art in the name of their ascending political domination. But for Giovanni de' Medici and his heirs, surrounded by a holy throng of witnesses, it symbolized their aspirations of a heavenly triumph as well.<sup>213</sup> To understand how the Medici realized their vision, this study began with an introduction that elaborated on the fundamentals, as well as the intricacies, of the Sacristy's origins. It was succeeded by an individual examination of each artistic component that constitutes the building, as well as their iconographical implications. Beginning with Manetti's fifteenth-century account, a substantial body of scholarship has focused on Brunelleschi's apparent disapproval of Donatello's sculptural ornamentation, suggesting that it disrupted the architectural equilibrium. It was my objective to show, however, that in viewing the Old Sacristy, one must not approach the architecture, sculpture and painting in aesthetic terms exclusively; the space deserves to be regarded as a felicitous ensemble, for it was through the unification of all three visual arts in the Sacristy—both literally and figuratively—that the epochal expectations of the Medici were most clearly proclaimed.

Briefly deviating from the issue at hand, here it is important to say a few words about Andrea del Verrocchio's tomb of Piero and Giovanni de' Medici. Completed in 1472, this sumptuous monument falls outside the scope of our exploration. Owing to its prominence in the Sacristy, however, it cannot go unmentioned. Lorenzo the Magnificent, son of Piero and nephew of Giovanni, commissioned the tomb, and in so doing, commemorated his father and uncle with as much honor as possible.<sup>214</sup> Offering an approximately equal view on each side (figs. 26a-b),<sup>215</sup> the

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<sup>213</sup> Saalman, *Filippo Brunelleschi*, 133, notes: "The programme is relatively obvious in content and implications. Giovanni de' Medici and his sons proclaimed their accord with the basic liturgical tenets of the establishment, both of their own family and of Florentine state, with which they felt an intimate relationship. Prophets, patrons, evangelists, fathers, apostles and angels are appropriately grouped around the Virgin and Child, Christ Crucified and Christ Prefigured."

<sup>214</sup> Butterfield, *Sculptures*, 47.

monument is unique in a variety of ways: its scale was without parallel among tombs for non-ecclesiastical, private Florentine citizens;<sup>216</sup> the lavish mixture of materials—of precious, multicolored marbles and costly bronze—was also unprecedented;<sup>217</sup> and it is noticeably free of commonplace Christian symbols and a sculpted effigy.<sup>218</sup> If anything, however, it is too luxurious



Figure 26a. (left) Verrocchio, Tomb of Piero and Giovanni de' Medici, seen from the Old Sacristy;  
Figure 26b. (right) Verrocchio, Tomb of Piero and Giovanni de' Medici, seen from the Medici Chapel dedicated to Saints Cosmas and Damian.

<sup>215</sup> Butterfield, *Sculptures*, 48, states: “there can be no doubt that the primary face of the monument is on the chapel, not the sacristy, side. This is indicated by the placement of the large escutcheon in the chapel above the frame of the tomb; by the fact that the inscription on the marble platform beneath the sarcophagus starts on the chapel side; and by the inscriptions in the tondi, of which the one on the chapel side of the monument is clearly the more important since it gives Piero and Giovanni’s names, while the tondo on the other side gives their ages.”

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>217</sup> “Although bronze appears frequently on Renaissance tombs in Tuscany,” notes Butterfield, *Sculptures*, 51, “normally it was only used in a restricted capacity for inscription tablets or heraldic decorations.” Butterfield points out, however, that the only exception to this rule was the bronze effigy of Baldassare Cossa (the antipope John XXIII), created by Donatello and Michelozzo. Nevertheless, Verrocchio’s tomb was “the first private secular tomb to make extensive use of bronze ornament”; such a medium was employed because “bronze memorials contributed to the preservation of a person’s fame.”

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, 49, 51.

and too much in a class by itself to fit seamlessly into the pre-existing context of the Old Sacristy, coming dangerously close to disrupting the latter's "beautiful whole."

The coinage *un bel composto* dates to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and refers to the work of that Baroque artist extraordinaire, Gian Lorenzo Bernini. His two biographers, Domenico Bernini (his son) and Filippo Baldinucci, employed the phrase when describing the ingenious ways in which Bernini unified the visual arts, particularly in the Cornaro Chapel, featuring the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, at Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome (fig. 27).<sup>219</sup> "It is the general opinion,"



Figure 27. Gian Lorenzo Bernini, Cornaro Chapel, with the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647–1652, Santa Maria della Vittoria, Rome.

<sup>219</sup> Irving Lavin, *Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts*, vol. 1, *Text Volume* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 3, 6. The original references can be found in Filippo Baldinucci, *Vita del Cavaliere Gio. Lorenzo Bernino scultore, architetto, e pittore, scritta da Filippo Baldinucci fiorentino* (Florence: Vincenzio Vangelisti, 1682); and Domenico Bernini, *Vita del cavaliere Gio. Lorenzo Bernino, descritta da Domenico Bernino suo figlio* (Rome: Rocco Bernabò, 1713).



they said, using slightly different words, “that Bernini was the first to attempt to unify architecture with sculpture and painting in such a way as to make of them all a beautiful whole [*un bel composto*].”<sup>220</sup> In adopting this expression for the Old Sacristy, my intention was not to dispute its pertinence to Bernini, but rather to show that it could be adapted to a different purpose and a different context altogether. A single master did not realize the Old Sacristy, it was conceived by the minds of several—above all by Brunelleschi and Donatello. It didn’t solely focus on the life or legend of a single saint, but also conveyed the multifaceted aspirations of a dynasty. And it was not a complex, theatrical *concetto*, but a stately coalescence of the local and the universal, the secular and the religious, the political and the personal; of past and present, tradition and innovation, heaven and earth. Only when considered in this way can the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo be understood for what it really is: *un bel composto*.

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 6.



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## Vita

Arrie Ann Kain was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, and her upbringing in one of America's most culturally remarkable cities was essential to the cultivation of her artistic, professional, and educational endeavors. As a child, she travelled abroad for the first time to Austria, Germany, and the former Yugoslavia, to visit her maternal grandfather's family in his hometown of Ston, Croatia; this initial voyage was the origin of her fondness for travel. After graduating from the Academy of the Sacred Heart, she travelled with her family to France, Switzerland, Austria and Italy, instilling in her a deep appreciation for others' culture and history. She matriculated at Louisiana State University, in 1999, to pursue a degree in fine arts with a concentration in graphic design. The summer before her senior year, she participated in the University of New Orleans International Summer School program in Innsbruck, Austria. The impact of this providential trip on her future aspirations was enormous. Prior to her 2004 graduation, she accepted a position as a graphic designer at a prominent New Orleans-based architecture firm, and began working full-time while simultaneously completing the coursework for her final undergraduate semester. In 2005, she began working as the sole graphic designer for one of Atlanta's largest architecture firms, and remained in that capacity for the next four years. Heeding the call of graduate school, she returned home to pursue not only a personal goal, but to better prepare herself for future professional ambitions. Following a May graduation, a December wedding, and a honeymoon to Croatia and Italy (with a special trip to the Old Sacristy of San Lorenzo), she will return to Georgia to embark on her next professional career as an educator, following a very noble family tradition. Having come to deeply cherish the treasures of Renaissance art, she hopes to extend that appreciation and inspire the next generation of students, in the same spirit as her own professors have inspired her.